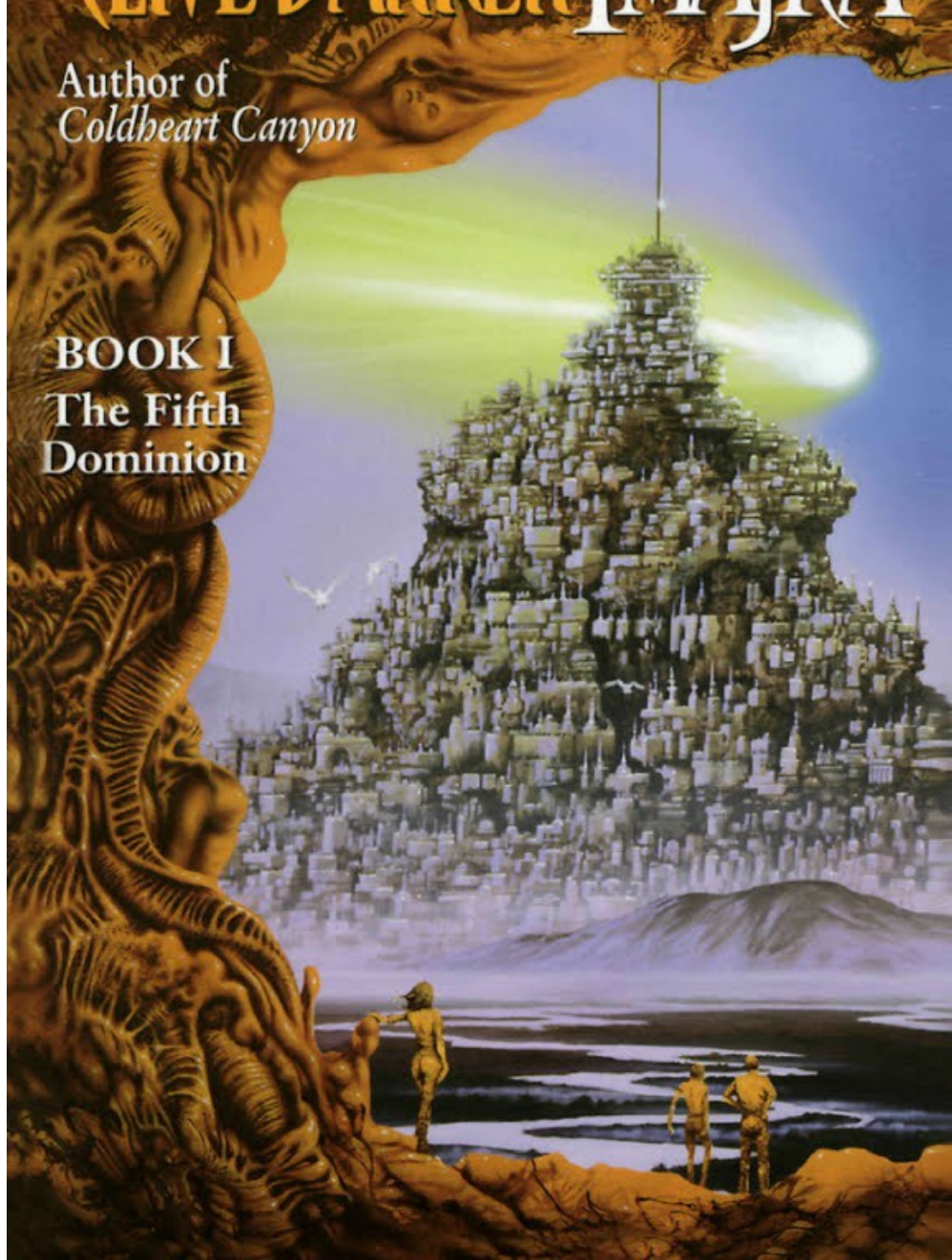


THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

CLIVE BARKER IMAJICA

Author of
Coldheart Canyon

BOOK I
The Fifth
Dominion



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RECONCILIATOR

LIKE THE THEATER DISTRICTS OF so many great cities across the Imajica, whether in Reconciled Dominions or in the Fifth, the neighborhood in which the Ipse stood had been a place of some notoriety in earlier times, when actors of both sexes had supplemented their wages with the old five-acter-hiring, retiring, seduction, conjunction, and remittance—all played hourly, night and day. The center of these activities had moved away, however, to the other side of the city, where the burgeoning numbers of middle-class clients felt less exposed to the gaze of their peers out seeking more respectable entertainment. Lickerish Street and its environs had sprung up in a matter of months and quickly became the third richest Kesparate in the city, leaving the theater district to decline into legitimacy.

Perhaps because it was of so little interest to people, it had survived the traumas of the last few hours better than most Kesparates its size. It had seen some action. General Mattalaus' battalions had passed through its streets going south to the causeway, where rebels were attempting to build a makeshift bridge across the delta; and later a party of families from the Caramess had taken refuge in Koppocovi's Rialto. But no barricades had been erected, and none of the buildings burned. The Deliquium would meet the morning intact. Its survival, however, would not be accorded to general disinterest; rather to the presence at its perimeter of Pale Hill, a site which was neither a hill nor pale, but a circle of remembrance in the center of which lay a well, used from time immemorial as a repository for the corpses of executed men, suicides, paupers, and, on occasion, romantics who favored rotting in such company. Tomorrow's rumors would whisper that the ghosts of these forsaken souls had risen to defend their terrain, preventing the vandals and the barricade builders from destroying the Kesparate by haunting the steps of the Ipse and the Rialto and howling in the streets like dogs maddened from chasing the comet's tail.

With her clothes in rags and her throat uttering one seamless supplication, Quaisoir went through the heart of several battles quite unscathed. There were many such grief-stricken women on the streets of Yzorderrex tonight, all begging Hapexamendios to return children or husbands into their arms, and they were for the most part given passage through the lines, their sobs password enough.

The battles themselves didn't distress her; she'd organized and viewed mass executions in her time. But when the heads had rolled she'd always made a swift departure, leaving the aftermath for somebody else to shovel up. Now she had to tread barefoot in streets that were like abattoirs, and her legendary indifference to the spectacle of death was overtaken by a horror so profound she had several times changed her direction to avoid a street that stank too strongly of innards and burned blood. She knew she would have to confess this cowardice when she finally found the Man of Sorrows, but she was so laden with guilt that one more fault or less would scarcely matter.

Then, as she came to the corner of the street at the end of which lay Pluthero Quexos' playhouse, somebody called her name. She stopped and looked for her summoner. A man dressed in blue was rising from a doorstep, the fruit he'd been peeling in one hand, the peeling blade in the other. He seemed to be in no doubt as to her identity.

"You're his woman," he said.

Was this the Lord? she wondered. The man she'd seen on the rooftops at the harbor had been silhouetted against a bright sky; his features had been difficult to see. Could this be him?

He was calling someone from the interior of the house on the steps of which he'd been sitting, a sometime bordello to judge by its lewdly carved portico. The disciple, an Oethac, emerged with a bottle in one hand, the other ruffling the hair of a cretinous boy child, naked and glistening. She began to doubt her first judgment, but she didn't dare leave until she had her hopes confirmed or dashed.

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and glistening. She began to doubt her first judgment, but she didn't dare leave until she had

her hopes confirmed or dashed.

"Are you the Man of Sorrows?" she said.

The fruit peeler shrugged. "Isn't everybody tonight?" he said, tossing the uneaten fruit

away.

The cretin leapt down the steps and snatched it up, pushing the entire thing into his mouth

so that his face bulged and the juice ran from his lips.

"You're the cause of this," the peeler said, jabbing his knife in Quaisoir's direction. He

glanced around at the Oethac. "She was at the harbor. I saw her."

"Who is she?" the Oethac said.

"The Autarch's woman," came the reply. "Quaisoir." He took a step towards her. "You are,

aren't you?"

She could no more deny this than she could take flight. If this man was indeed Jesu, she

couldn't begin her pleas for forgiveness with a lie.

"Yes," she told him, "I'm Quaisoir. I was the Autarch's woman."

"She's fucking beautiful," the Oethac said.

"What she looks like doesn't matter," the fruit peeler told him. "It's what she's done that's

important."

"Yes," Quaisoir said, daring to believe now that this was indeed the Son of David. "That's

what's important. What I've done.”

“The executions ...”

“Yes.”

“The purges ...”

“Yes.”

“I've lost a lot of friends, and you're the reason.”

“Oh, Lord, forgive me,” she said, and dropped to her knees.

“I saw you at the harbor this morning,” Jesu said, approaching her as she knelt. “You were

smiling.”

“Forgive me.”

“Looking around and smiling. And I thought, when I saw you—”

He was three paces away from her now.

”—your eyes glittering—”

His sticky hand took hold of her head.

”—I thought, those eyes—”

He raised the knife—

”—have to go.”

— and brought it down again, quick and sharp, sharp and quick, pricking out his disciple's

sight before she could start to scream.

The tears that suddenly filled Jude's eyes stung like no tears she'd ever shed before. She let

out a sob, more of pain than of grief, pushing the heels of her hands against her eye sockets

to stem the flow. But it wouldn't cease. The tears kept coming, hot and harsh, making her

whole head throb. She felt Dowd's arm take hold of hers and was glad of it. Without his

support, she was certain she would have fallen.

"What's wrong?" he said.

The answer—that she was sharing some agony with Quaisoir—was not one she could voice

to Dowd. "It must be the smoke," she said. "I can barely see."

"We're almost at the Ipse," he replied. "But we have to keep moving for a little while

longer. It's not safe in the open air."

That was true enough. Her eyes—which at present could only see pulsing red—had been

laid on enough atrocities in the last hour to fuel a lifetime of nightmares. The Yzordder —rex

of her longings, the city whose spicy wind, blowing from the Retreat months before, had

summoned her like the call of a lover to bed, was virtually in ruins. Perhaps that was why

Quaisoir wept these burning tears.

They dried after a time, but the pain lingered. Though she despised the man she was

leaning upon, without his support she would have dropped to the ground and remained

there. He coaxed her on, step by step. The Ipse was close now, he said: just a street or two

away. She could rest there, while he soaked up the echoes of past glories. She barely

attended to his monologue. It was her sister who filled her thoughts, her anticipation of

their meeting now tinged with unease. She'd imagined Quaisoir would have come into these

streets protected, and that at the sight of her Dowd would simply retreat, leaving them to

their reunion. But what if Dowd was not overtaken by superstitious awe? What if, instead,

he attacked one or both of them? Would Quaisoir have any defense against his mites? She

began to wipe at her streaming eyes as she stumbled on, determined to be clear-sighted

when the moment came, and primed to escape Dowd's leash.

His monologue, when it ceased, did so abruptly. He halted, drawing Jude to a stop at his

side. She raised her head. The street ahead was not well lit, but the glow of distant fires

found its way between the buildings, and there, crawling into one such flickering shaft, she

saw her sister. Jude let out a sob. Quaisoir's eyes had been stabbed out, and her torturers

were coming in pursuit of her. One was a child, one an Oethac. The third, the most blood-

spattered, was also the most nearly human, but his features were twisted out of true by the

pleasure he was taking in Quaisoir's torment. The blinding knife was still in his hand, and

now he raised it above his victim's naked back.

Before Dowd could move to stop her, Jude screamed, "Stop!"

The knife was arrested in mid-descent, and all three of Quaisoir's pursuers looked around

at Jude. The child registered nothing; its face was an imbecilic blank. The knife wielder was

equally silent, though his expression was one of disbelief. It was the Oethac that spoke, the

words he uttered slurred but ripe with panic.

“You . . . keep . . . your distance,” he said, his fearful glance going back and forth between

the wounded woman and this echo of her, whole and strong.

The blinder found his voice now, and began to hush him, but the Oethac rattled on.

“Look at her!” he said. “What the fuck is this, eh? Look at her.”

“Just shut your trap,” the blinder said. “She's not going to touch us.”

“You don't know that,” said the Oethac, picking up the child with one arm and slinging it

over his shoulder. “It wasn't me,” he went on, as he backed away. “I never laid a finger on

her. I swear. On my scars, I swear.”

Jude ignored his weaselings and took a step towards Quaisoir. As soon as she moved, the

Oethac fled. The blinder, however, held his ground, taking courage from his blade.

“I'll do you the same way,” he warned. “I don't care who the fuck you are, I'll do you!”

From behind her, Jude heard Dowd's voice, carrying an authority she'd never heard in it

before.

“I'd leave her be if I were you,” he said.

His utterance brought a response from Quaisoir. She raised her head and turned in Dowd's

direction. Her eyes had not simply been stabbed out but virtually dug from their sockets.

Seeing the holes, Jude was ashamed to have been so troubled by the little ache that she felt

in sympathy; it was nothing beside Quaisoir's hurt. Yet the woman's voice was almost joyful.

"Lord?" she said. "Sweet Lord, is this punishment enough? Will you forgive me now?"

Neither the nature of the error Quaisoir was making here nor its profound irony was lost

on Jude. Dowd was no savior. But he was happy enough to assume that role, it seemed. He

replied to Quaisoir with a delicacy as feigned as the sonority he'd affected seconds before.

"Of course I'll forgive you," he said. "That's what I'm here to do."

Jude might have been tempted to disabuse Quaisoir of her illusions there and then, but that

the blinder was usefully distracted by Dowd's performance.

"Tell me who you are, child," Dowd said.

"You know who the fuck she is," the blinder spat, "Quaisoir! It's fucking Quaisoir!"

Dowd glanced back at Jude, his expression one of comprehension rather than shock. Then

he looked again at the blinder.

"So it is," he said.

"You know what she's done same as me," the man said. "She deserves worse than this."

"Worse, you think?" Dowd said, continuing to advance towards the man, who was

nervously passing his knife from hand to hand, as though he sensed that Dowd's capacity for

cruelty outstripped his own a hundredfold and was preparing to

defend himself if need be.

“What worse would you do?” Dowd said.

“What she's done to others, over and over.”

“She did these things personally, you think?”

“I wouldn't put it past her,” he said. “Who knows what the fuck goes on up there? People

disappear, and get washed up again in pieces. . . .” He tried a little smile, plainly nervous

now. “You know she deserved it.”

“And you?” Dowd asked. “What do you deserve?”

“I'm not saying I'm a hero,” the blinder replied. “I'm just saying she had it coming.”

“I see,” said Dowd.

From Jude's vantage point, what happened next was more a matter of conjecture than

observation. She saw Quaisoir's maimer take a step away from Dowd, repugnance on his

face; then saw him lunge forward as if to stab Dowd through the heart. His attack put him in

range of the mites, and before his blade could find Dowd's flesh they must have leapt at the

blinder, because he dropped back with a shout of horror, his free hand going up to his face.

Jude had seen what followed before. The man scrabbled at his eyes and nostrils and mouth,

his legs giving out beneath him as the mites undid his system from the inside. He fell at

Dowd's feet and rolled around in a fury of frustration, eventually

putting his knife into his

mouth and digging bloodily for the things that were unmaking him.
The life went out of him

as he was doing so, his hand dropping from his face, leaving the blade
in his throat as though

he'd choked upon it.

"It's over," Dowd said to Quaisoir, who had wrapped her arms around
her shuddering body

and was lying on the ground a few yards from her tormentor's corpse.
"He won't hurt you

again."

"Thank you, Lord."

"The things he accused you of, child?"

"Yes,"

"Terrible things."

"Yes."

"Are you guilty of them?"

"I am," Quaisoir said. "I want to confess them before I die. Will you
hear me?"

"I will!" Dowd said, oozing magnanimity.

After being merely a witness to these events as they unraveled, Jude
now stepped towards

Quaisoir and her confessor, but Dowd heard her approach and turned
to shake his head.

"I've sinned, my Lord Jesu," Quaisoir was saying. "I've sinned so many
times. I beg you to

forgive me."

It was the despair Jude heard in her sister's voice, rather than Dowd's

rebuff, that kept her

from making her presence known. Quaisoir was in extremis, and given that it was her clear

desire to commune with some forgiving spirit, what right did Jude have to intervene? Dowd

was not the Christ Quaisoir believed him to be, but did that matter? What would revealing

the father confessor's true identity achieve now, besides adding to the sum of her sister's

suffering?

Dowd had knelt beside Quaisoir and had taken her up into his arms, demonstrating a

capacity for tenderness, or at least for its replication, that Jude would never have believed

him capable of. For her part, Quaisoir was in bliss, despite her wounds. She clutched at

Dowd's jacket and thanked him over and over for doing her this kindness. He hushed her

softly, saying there was no need for her to make a catalogue of her crimes.

"You have them in your heart, and I see them there," he said. "I forgive them. Tell me

instead about your husband. Where is he? Why hasn't he also come asking for forgiveness?"

"He didn't believe you were here," Quaisoir said. "I told him I'd seen you down at the

harbor, but he has no faith."

"None?"

"Only in himself," she said bitterly. Dowd began to rock backward and forward as he plied

her with further questions, his focus so devoted to his victim he didn't notice Jude's

approach. She envied Dowd his embrace, wishing it were her arms Quaisoir was lying in

instead of his.

"Who is your husband?" Dowd was asking.

"You know who he is," Quaisoir replied. "He's the Autarch. He rules the Imajica."

"But he wasn't always Autarch, was he?"

"No."

"So what was he before?" Dowd wanted to know. "An ordinary man?"

"No," she said. "I don't think he was ever an ordinary man. I don't remember exactly."

He stopped rocking her. "I think you do," he said, his tone subtly shifting. "Tell me," he

said. "Tell me: What was he before he ruled Yzordderrex? And what were you?"

"I was nothing," she said simply.

"Then how were you raised so high?"

"He loved me. From the very beginning, he loved me."

"You did no unholy service to be elevated?" Dowd said.

She hesitated, and he pressed her harder.

"What did you do?" he demanded. "What? What?" There was a distant echo of Oscar in that

expletive: the servant speaking with his master's voice.

Intimidated by this fury, Quaisoir replied. "I visited the Bastion of the Banu many times,"

she confessed. "Even the Annex. I went there too."

"And what's there?"

"Madwomen. Some who killed their spouses, or their children."

"Why did you seek such pitiful creatures out?"

"There are ... powers ... hidden among them."

At this, Jude attended more closely than ever.

"What kind of powers?" Dowd said, voicing the question she was silently asking.

"I did nothing unholy," Quaisoir protested. "I just wanted to be cleansed. The Pivot was in

my dreams. Every night, its shadow on me, breaking my back. I only wanted to be cleansed

of it."

"And were you?" Dowd asked her. Again she didn't answer at first, until he pressed her,

almost harshly. "Were you?"

"I wasn't cleansed, I was changed," she said. "The women polluted me. I have a taint in my

flesh and I wish it were out of me." She began to tear at her clothes, till her fingers found her

belly and breasts. "I want it driven out!" she said. "It gave me new dreams, worse than

before."

"Calm yourself," Dowd said.

"But I want it out! I want it out!" A kind of fit had suddenly taken her, and she flailed so

violently in his arms she fell from them. "I can feel it in me now," she said, her nails raking

her breasts.

Jude looked at Dowd, willing him to intervene, but he simply stood up, staring at the

woman's distress, plainly taking pleasure in it. Quaisoir's self-assault was not theatrics. She

was drawing blood from her skin, still yelling that she wanted the taint out of her. In her

agony, a subtle change was coming over her flesh, as though she was sweating out the taint

she'd spoken of. Her pores were oozing a sheen of iridescence, and the cells of her skin were

subtly changing color. Jude knew the blue she saw spreading from her sister's neck, down

over her body and up towards her contorted face. It was the blue of the stone eye, the blue

of the Goddess.

"What is this?" Dowd demanded of his confessee.

"Out of me! Out of me!"

"Is this the taint?" He went down on his haunches beside her. "Is it?"

"Drive it out of me!" Quaisoir sobbed, and began assaulting her poor body afresh.

Jude could endure it no longer. Allowing her sister to die blissfully in the arms of a

surrogate divinity was one thing. This self-mutilation was quite another. She broke her vow

of silence.

"Stop her," she said.

Dowd looked up from his study, drawing his thumb across his throat to hush her. But it

was too late. Despite her own commotion, Quaisoir had heard her sister speak. Her

thrashings slowed, and her blind head turned in Jude's direction.

"Who's there?" she demanded.

There was naked fury on Dowd's face, but he hushed her softly. She would not be placated,

however.

"Who's with you, Lord?" she asked him.

With his reply he made an error that unknitted the whole fiction. He lied to her.

"There's nobody," he said.

"I heard a woman's voice. Who's there?"

"I told you," Dowd insisted. "Nobody." He put his hand upon her face. "Now calm yourself.

We're alone."

"No, we're not."

"Do you doubt me, child?" Dowd replied, his voice, after the harshness of his last

interrogations, modulating with this question, so that he sounded almost wounded by her

lack of faith. Quaisoir's reply was to silently take his hand from her face, seizing it tightly in

her blue, blood-speckled fingers.

"That's better," he said.

Quaisoir ran her fingers over his palm. Then she said, "No scars."

"There'll always be scars," Dowd said, lavishing his best pontifical manner upon her. But

he'd missed the point of her remark.

"There are no scars on your hand," she said.

He retrieved it from her grasp. "Believe in me," he said.

"No," she replied. "You're not the Man of Sorrows." The joy had gone from her voice. It was

thick, almost threatening. "You can't save me," she said, suddenly flailing wildly to drive the

pretender from her. "Where's my Savior? I want my Savior!"

"He isn't here," Jude told her. "He never was."

Quaisoir turned in Jude's direction. "Who are you?" she said. "I know your voice from

somewhere."

"Keep your mouth shut," Dowd said, stabbing his finger in Jude's direction. "Or so help me

you'll taste the mites—"

"Don't be afraid of him," Quaisoir said.

"She knows better than that," Dowd replied. "She's seen what I can do."

Eager for some excuse to speak, so that Quaisoir could hear more of the voice she knew but

couldn't yet name, Jude spoke up in support of Dowd's conceit.

"What he says is right," she told Quaisoir. "He can hurt us both, badly. He's not the Man of

Sorrows, sister."

Whether it was the repetition of words Quaisoir had herself used several times—Man of

Sorrows—or the fact that Jude had called her sister, or both, the woman's sightless face

slackened, the bafflement going out of it. She lifted herself from the ground.

"What's your name?" she murmured. "Tell me your name."

"She's nothing," Dowd said, echoing Quaisoir's own description of herself minutes earlier.

"She's a dead woman." He made a move in Jude's direction. "You understand so little," he

said. "And I've forgiven you a lot for that. But I can't indulge you any longer. You've spoiled a

fine game. I don't want you spoiling any more."

He put his left hand, its forefinger extended, to his lips.

"I don't have many mites left," he said, "so one will have to do. A slow unraveling. But even

a shadow like you can be undone."

"I'm a shadow now, am I?" Jude said to him. "I thought we were the same, you and I?

Remember that speech?"

"That was in another life, lovey," Dowd said. "It's different here. You could do me harm

here. So I'm afraid it's going to have to be thank you and good night."

She started to back away from him, wondering as she did so how much distance she would

have to put between them to be out of range of his wretched mites. He watched her retreat

with pity on his face.

"No good, lovey," he said. "I know these streets like the back of my hand."

She ignored his condescension and took another backward step, her eye fixed on his mouth

where the mites nested, but aware that Quaisoir had risen and was standing no more than a

yard from her defender.

“Sister?” the woman said.

Dowd glanced around, distracted from Jude long enough for her to take to her heels. He let

out a shout as she fled, and the blind woman lunged towards the sound, grabbing his arm

and neck and dragging him towards her. The noise she made as she did so was like nothing

Jude had heard from human lips, and she envied it: a cry to shatter bones like glass and

shake color from the air. She was glad not to be closer, or it might have brought her to her

knees.

She looked back once, in time to see Dowd spit the lethal mite at Quaisoir's empty sockets,

and prayed her sister had better defenses against its harm than the man who'd emptied

them. Whether or no, she could do little to help. Better to run while she had the chance, so

that at least one of them survived the cataclysm.

She turned the first corner she came to, and kept turning corners thereafter, to put as

many decisions between herself and her pursuer. No doubt Dowd's boast was true; he did

indeed know these streets, where he claimed he'd once triumphed, like his own hand. It

followed that the sooner she was out of them, and into terrain

unfamiliar to them both, the

more chance she had of losing him. Until then, she had to be swift and as nearly invisible as

she could make herself. Like the shadow Dowd had dubbed her: darkness in a deeper dark,

flitting and fleeting; seen and gone.

But her body didn't want to oblige. It was weary, beset with aches and shudders. Twin fires

had been set in her chest, one in each lung. Invisible hounds ripped her heels bloody. She

didn't allow herself to slow her pace, however, until she'd left the streets of playhouses and

brothels behind her and was delivered into a place that might have stood as a set for a

Pluthero Quexos tragedy: a circle a hundred yards wide, bounded by a high wall of sleek ,

black stone. The fires that burned here didn't rage uncontrolled, as they did in so many

other parts of the city, but flickered from the tops of the walls in their dozens; tiny white

flames, like night-lights, illuminating the inclined pavement that led down to an opening in

the center of the circle. She could only guess at its function. An entrance into the city's secret

underworld, perhaps, or a well? There were flowers everywhere, most of the petals shed and

gone to rot, slickening the pavement beneath her feet as she approached the hole, obliging

her to tread with care. The suspicion grew that if this was a well, its water was poisoned

with the dead. Obituaries were scrawled on the pavement—names,

dates, messages, even

crude illustrations—their numbers increasing the closer to the edge she came. Some had

even been inscribed on the inner wall of the well, by mourners brave or broken-hearted

enough to dare the drop.

Though the hole exercised the same fascination as a cliff edge, inviting her to peer into its

depths, she refused its petitions and halted a yard or two from the lip. There was a sickly

smell out of the place, though it wasn't strong. Either the well had not been used of late, or

else its occupants lay a very long way down.

Her curiosity satisfied, she looked around to choose the best route out. There were no less

than eight exits—nine, including the well—and she went first to the avenue that lay opposite

the one she'd come in by. It was dark and smoky, and she might have taken it had there not

been signs that it was blocked by rubble some way down its length. She went to the next,

and it too was blocked, fires flickering between fallen timbers. She was going to the third

door when she heard Dowd's voice. She turned. He was standing on the far side of the well,

with his head slightly cocked and a put—upon expression on his face, like a parent who'd

caught up with a truant child.

“Didn't I tell you?” he said. “I know these streets.” “I heard you.”

“It isn't so bad that you came here,” he said, wandering towards her.

“It saves me a mite.”

“Why do you want to hurt me?” she said. “I might ask you the same question,” he said. “You

do, don't you? You'd love to see me hurt. You'd be even happier if you could do the hurting

personally. Admit it!” “I admit it.”

“There. Don't I make a good confessor after all? And that's just the beginning. You've got

some secrets in you I didn't even know you had.” He raised his hand and described a circle

as he spoke. “I begin to see the perfection of all this. Things coming round, coming round,

back to the place where it all began. That is: to her. Or to you; it doesn't matter, really.

You're the same.”

“Twins?” Jude said. “Is that it?”

“Nothing so trite, lovey. Nothing so natural. I insulted you, calling you a shadow. You' re

more miraculous than that. You're—” He stopped. “Well, wait. This isn't strictly fair. Here's

me telling you what I know and getting nothing from you.”

“I don't know anything,” Jude said. “I wish I did.”

Dowd stooped and picked up a blossom, one of the few underfoot that was still intact. “But

whatever Quaisoir knows you also know,” he said. “At least about how it all came apart.”

“How what came apart?”

“The Reconciliation. You were there. Oh, yes, I know you think you're

just an innocent

bystander, but there's nobody in this, nobody, who's innocent. Not Estabrook, not

Godolphin, not Gentle or his mystif. They've all got confessions as long as their arms."

"Even you?" she asked him.

"Ah, well, with me it's different." He sighed, sniffing at the flower. "I'm an actor chappie. I

fake my raptures. I'd like to change the world, but I end up as entertainment. Whereas all

you lovers"—he spoke the word contemptuously—"who couldn't give a fuck about the world

as long as you're feeling passionate, you're the ones who make the cities burn and the

nations tumble. You're the engines in the tragedy, and most of the time you don't even know

it. So what's an actor chappie to do, if he wants to be taken seriously? I'll tell you. He has to

learn to fake his feelings so well he'll be allowed off the stage and into the real world. It's

taken me a lot of rehearsal to get where I am, believe me. I started small, you know; very

small. Messenger. Spear-carrier. I once pimped for the Unbeheld, but it was just a one-night

stand. Then I was back serving lovers—"

"Like Oscar."

"Like Oscar."

"You hated him, didn't you?"

"No, I was simply bored, with him and his whole family. He was so like his father, and his

father's father, and so on, all the way back to crazy Joshua. I became impatient. I knew things

would come around eventually, and I'd have my moment, but I got so tired of waiting, and

once in a while I let it show."

"And you plotted."

"But of course. I wanted to hurry things along, towards the moment of my ... emancipation.

It was all very calculated. But that's me, you see? I'm an artist with the soul of an

accountant."

"Did you hire Pie to kill me?"

"Not knowingly," Dowd said. "I set some wheels in motion, but I never imagined they'd

carry us all so far. I didn't even know the mystic was alive. But as things went on, I began to

see how inevitable all this was. First Pie's appearance. Then your meeting Godolphin, and

your falling for each other. It was all bound to happen. It was what you were born to do,

after all. Do you miss him, by the way? Tell the truth."

"I've scarcely thought about him," she replied, surprised by the truth of this.

"Out of sight, out of mind, eh? Ah, I'm so glad I can't feel love. The misery of it. The sheer,

unadulterated misery." He mused a moment, then said, "This is so much like the first time,

you know. Lovers yearning, worlds trembling. Of course last time I was merely a spear -

carrier. This time I intend to be the prince."

“What do you mean, I was born to fall for Godolphin? I don't even remember being born.”

“I think it's time you did,” Dowd said, tossing away the flower as he approached her.

“Though these rites of passage are never very easy, lovey, so brace yourself. At least you've

picked a good spot. We can dangle our feet over the edge while we talk about how you came

into the world.”

“Oh, no,” she said. “I'm not going near that hole.”

“You think I want to kill you?” he said. “I don't. I just want you to unburden yourself of a

few memories. That's not asking too much, is it? Be fair. I've given you a glimpse of what's in

my heart. Now show me yours.” He took hold of her wrist “I won't take no for an answer,” he

said, and drew her to the edge of the well.

She'd not ventured this close before, and its proximity was vertiginous. Though she cursed

him for having the strength to drag her here, she was glad he had her in a tight hold.

“Do you want to sit?” he said. She shook her head. “As you like,” he went on. “There's more

chance of your falling, but it's your decision. You've become a very self-willed woman, lovey,

I've noticed that. You were malleable enough at the beginning. That was the way you were

bred to be, of course.”

“I wasn't bred to be anything.”

“How do you know?” he said. “Two minutes ago you were claiming you don't even

remember the past. How do you know what you were meant to be? Made to be?” He glanced

down the well. “The memory's in your head somewhere, lovey. You just have to be willing to

coax it out. If Quaisoir sought some Goddess, maybe you did too, even if you don't remember

it. And if you did, then maybe you're more than Joshua's Peachplum. Maybe you've got some

place in the action I haven't accounted for.”

“Where would I meet Goddesses, Dowd?” Jude replied. “I've lived in the Fifth, in London, in

Notting Hill Gate. There are no Goddesses.”

Even as she spoke she thought of Celestine, buried beneath the Tabula Rasa's tower. Was

she a sister to the deities that haunted Yzordderrex? A transforming force, locked away by a

sex that worshiped fixedness? At the memory of the prisoner, and her cell, Jude's mind grew

suddenly light, as though she'd downed a whisky on an empty stomach. She had been

touched by the miraculous, after all. So if once, why not many times? If now, why not in her

forgotten past?

“I've got no way back,” she said, protesting the difficulty of this as much for her own

benefit as Dowd's.

“It's easy,” he replied. “Just think of what it was like to be born.”

“I don't even remember my childhood.”

“You had no childhood, lovey. You had no adolescence. You were born just the way you are,

overnight. Quaisoir was the first Judith, and you, my sweet, are only her replica. Perfect,

maybe, but still a replica.”

“I won't... I don't... believe you.”

“Of course you must refuse the truth at first. It's perfectly understandable. But your body

knows what's true and what isn't. You're shaking, inside and out....”

“I'm tired,” she said, knowing the explanation was pitifully weak.

“You're feeling more than weary,” Dowd said. “Admit it.”

As he pried, she remembered the results of his last revelations about her past: how she'd

dropped to the kitchen floor, hamstrung by invisible knives. She dared not succumb to such

a collapse now, with the well a foot from where she stood, and Dowd knew it.

“You have to face the memories,” he was saying. “Just spit them out. Go on. You'll feel

better for it, I promise you.”

She could feel both her limbs and her resolve weakening as he spoke, but the prospect of

facing whatever lay in the darkness at the back of her skull—and however much she

distrusted Dowd, she didn't doubt there was something horrendous there—was almost as

terrifying as the thought of the well taking her. Perhaps it would be better to die here and

now, two sisters extinguished within the same hour, and never know whether Dowd's claims

were true or not. But then suppose he'd been lying to her all along—
the actor chappie's

finest performance yet—and she was not a shadow, not a replica, not
a thing bred to do

service, but a natural child with natural parents: a creature unto
herself, real, complete?

Then she'd be giving herself to death out of fear of self-discovery, and
Dowd would have

claimed another victim. The only way to defeat him was to call his
bluff; to do as he kept

urging her to do and go into the darkness at the back of her head,
ready to embrace

whatever revelations it concealed. Whichever Judith she was, she was;
whether real or

replica, natural or bred. There was no escape from herself in the living
world. Better to

know the truth, once and for all.

The decision ignited a flame in her skull, and the first phantoms of the
past appeared in

her mind's eye.

“Oh, my Goddess,” she murmured, throwing back her head. “What is
this? What is this?”

She saw herself lying on bare boards in an empty room, a fire burning
in the grate,

warming her in her sleep and flattering her nakedness with its tuster.
Somebody had

marked her body while she slept, daubing upon it a design she
recognized—the glyph she'd

first seen in her mind's eye when she'd made love with Oscar, then
glimpsed again as she

passed between Dominions—the spiraling sign of her flesh, here
painted on flesh itself in

half a dozen colors.

She moved in her sleep, and the whorls seemed to leave traces of
themselves in the air

where she'd been, their persistence exciting another motion, this other
in the ring of sand

that bounded her hard bed. It rose around her like the curtain of the
Borealis, shimmering

with the same colors in which her glyph had been painted, as though
something of her

essential anatomy was in the very air of the room. She was entranced
by the beauty of the

sight.

“What are you seeing?” she heard Dowd asking her.

“Me,” she said, “lying on the floor ... in a circle of sand....”

“Are you sure it's you?” he said.

She was about to pour scorn on his question, when she realized its
import. Perhaps this

wasn't her, but her sister.

“Is there any way of knowing?” she said.

“You'll soon see,” he told her.

So she did. The curtain of sand began to wave more violently, as if
seized by a wind

unleashed within the circle. Particles flew from it, intensifying as they
were thrown against

the dark air: motes of the purest color rising like new stars, then
dropping again, burning in

their descent, towards the place where she, the witness, lay. She was

lying on the ground

close to her sister, receiving the rain of color like a grateful earth,
needing its sustenance if

she was to grow and swell and become fruitful.

“What am I?” she said, following the fall of color to snatch a glimpse
of the ground it was

falling upon.

The beauty of what she'd seen so far had lulled her into vulnerability.
When she saw her

own unfinished body, the shock threw her out of the remembrance
like a blow. Sud -, denly

she was teetering on the wall's edge again, with Dowd's hand the only
check upon her

falling. Icewater sweat filled her pores.

“Don't let me go,” she said.

“What are you seeing?” he asked her.

“Is this being born?” she sobbed. “Oh, Christ, is this being born?”

“Go back to the memory,” he said. “You've begun it, so, finish it!” He
shook her. “Hear me?

Finish it!”

She saw his face raging before her. She saw the well, yearning behind.
And in between, in

the firelit room awaiting her in her head, she saw a nightmare worse
than both: her

anatomy, barely made, lying in a circle of perverted enchantments,
raw until the distillates

of another woman's body put skin on her sinew and color in that skin,
put the tint in her

eyes and the gloss on her lips, gave her the same breasts, belly, and

sex. This was not birth,

it was duplication. She was a facsimile, a likeness stolen from a slumbering original.

"I can't bear it," she said.

"I did warn you, lovey," Dowd replied. "It's never easy, reliving the first moments."

"I'm not even real," she said.

"Let's stay clear of the metaphysics," came the reply. "What you are, you are. You had to

know sooner or later."

"I can't bear it. I can't bear it."

"But you are bearing it," Dowd said. "You just have to take it slowly. Step by step."

"No more...."

"Yes," he insisted. "A lot more. That was the worst. It'll get easier from now on."

That was a lie. When memory took her again, almost without her inviting it, she was

raising her arms above her head, letting the colors congeal around her outstretched fingers.

Pretty enough, until she let one arm drop beside her and her new-made nerves felt a

presence at her side, sharing the womb. She turned her head and screamed. "What is it?"

Dowd said. "Did the Goddess come?" It was no Goddess. It was another unfinished thing,

gaping at her with lidless eyes, putting out its colorless tongue, which was still so rough it

could have licked her new skin off her. She retreated from it, and her fear aroused it, the

pale anatomy shaken by silent laughter. It too had gathered motes of stolen color, she saw,

but it had not bathed in them; rather, it had caught them in its hands, postponing the

moment it attired itself until it had luxuriated in its flayed nakedness.

Dowd was interrogating her again. "Is it the Goddess?" he was asking. "What are you

seeing? Speak it out, woman! Speak it—"

His demand was cut suddenly short. There was a beat of silence, then a cry of alarm so

shrill her conjuring of the circle and the thing she'd shared it with vanished. She felt Dowd's

grip on her wrist slip, and her body toppled. She flailed as she fell, and more by luck than

design her motion threw her sideways, along the rim of the well, rather than pitching her

within. Instantly, she began to slip down the incline. She clutched at the pavement. But the

stone had been polished by years of passage, and her body slid towards the edge as if the

depths were calling in a long-neglected debt. Her legs kicked empty air, her hips sliding over

the well's lip while her fingers sought some purchase, however slight—a name etched a little

deeper than the rest; a rose thorn, wedged between stones—that would give her some

defense against gravity. As she did so she heard Dowd cry out a second time, and she looked

up to see a miracle.

Quaisoir had survived the mite. The change that had come over her flesh when she rose in

defiance of Dowd was here completed. Her skin was the color of the blue eye; her face, so

lately maimed, was bright. But these were little changes, beside the dozen ribbons of her

substance, several yards in length, that were unraveled around her, their source her back,

their purpose to touch in succession the ground beneath her and raise her up into a strange

flight. The power she'd found in the Bastion was blazing in her and Dowd could only retreat

before it, to the edge of the well. He kept his silence now, dropping to his knees, preparin g to

crawl away beneath the spiraling skirts of filament

Jude felt slip what little hold her fingers had and let out cry for help.

“Sister?” Quaisoir said.

“Here!” Jude yelled. “Quickly.”

As Quaisoir moved towards the well, the tendrils' lightest touch enough to propel her

forward, Dowd made his move, ducking beneath the tendrils. He'd mistimed his escape,

however. One of the filaments caught his shoulder and, spiraling around his neck, pitched

him over the edge of the well. As he went, Jude's right hand lost its purchase entirely, and

she began to slide, a final desperate yell coming from her as she did so. But Quaisoir was as

swift in saving as dispatching. Before the well's rim rose to eclipse the scene above, Jude felt

the filaments seize her wrist and arm, their spirals instantly tightening around her. She

seized them in return, her exhausted muscles quickened by the touch, and Quaisoir drew her

up over the edge of the well, depositing her on the pavement. She rolled over onto her back

and panted like a sprinter at the tape, while Quaisoir's filaments unknitted themselves and

returned to serve their mistress.

It was the sound of Dowd's begging, echoing up from the well where he was suspended,

that made her sit up. There was nothing in his cries she might not have predicted from a

man who'd rehearsed servitude over so many generations. He promised Quaisoir eternal

obedience and utter self-abnegation if only she'd save him from this terror. Wasn't mercy

the jewel in any heavenly crown, he sobbed, and wasn't she an angel?

"No," Quaisoir said. "Nor am I the bride of Christ."

Undeterred, he began a new cycle of descriptions and negotiations: what she was; what he

would do for her, in perpetuity. She would find no better servant, no humbler acolyte. What

did she want, his manhood?; it was nothing; he would geld himself there and then. She only

had to ask. If Jude had any doubt as to the strength Quaisoir had gained, she had evidence of

it now, as the tendrils drew their prisoner up from the well. He gushed like a holed bucket as

he came. "Thank you, a thousand times, thank you."

In view now, he was in double jeopardy, Jude saw, his feet hanging over empty air and the

tendrils around his throat tight enough to throttle him, had he not relieved their pressure by

thrusting his fingers between noose and neck. Tears poured down his cheeks, in theatrical

excess.

"Ladies," he said. "How do I begin to make amends?" Quaisoir's response was another

question. "Why was I misled by you?" she said. "You're just a man. What do you know about

divinities?"

Dowd looked afraid to reply, not certain which would be more likely to prove fatal, denial

or affirmation. "Tell her the truth," Jude advised him. "I served the Unbeheld once," he said.

"He found me in the desert and sent me to the Fifth Dominion."
"Why?"

"He had business there." "What business?"

Dowd began to squirm afresh. His tears had dried up. The drama had gone from his voice.

"He wanted a woman," he said, "to bear him a son in the Fifth."

"And you found one?"

"Yes, I did. Her name was Celestine."

"And what happened to her?"

"I don't know. I did what I was asked to do, and—"

"What happened to her?" Quaisoir said again, more forcefully.

"She died," Dowd replied, trailing that possibility to see if it was

challenged. When it

wasn't he took it up with fresh gusto. "Yes, that's what happened. She perished. In childbirth,

so I believe. Hapexamendios impregnated her, you see, and her poor body couldn't bear the

responsibility."

Dowd's style was by now too familiar to deceive Jude. She knew the music he put into his

voice when he lied, and heard it clearly now. He was well aware that Celestine was alive.

There had been no such music in his early revelations, however—his talk of procuring for

Hapexamendios—which seemed to indicate that this was indeed a service he'd done the

God.

"What about the child?" Quaisoir asked him. "Was it a son or a daughter?"

"I don't know," he said. "Truly, I don't."

Another lie, and one his captor sensed. She loosened the noose, and he dropped a few

inches, letting out a sob of terror and clutching at the filaments in his panic.

"Don't drop me! Please God, don't drop me!"

"What about the child?"

"What do I know?" he said, tears beginning again, only this time the real thing. "I'm

nothing. I'm a messenger. A spear-carrier."

"A pimp," she said.

"Yes, that too. I confess it. I'm a pimp! But it's nothing, it's nothing.

Tell her, Judith! I'm just

an actor chappie. A fucking worthless actor chappie!"

"Worthless, eh?"

"Worthless!"

"Then good night," Quaisoir said, and let him go.

The noose slipped through his fingers with such suddenness he had no time to take a faster

hold, and he dropped like a dead man from a cut rope, not even beginning to shriek for

several seconds, as though sheer disbelief had silenced him until the iris of smoky sky above

him had closed almost to a dot. When his din finally rose it was high-pitched, but brief.

As it stopped, Jude laid her palms against the pavement and, without looking up at

Quaisoir, murmured her thanks, in part for her preservation but at least as much for Dowd's

dispatch.

"Who was he?" Quaisoir asked.

"I only know a little part of this," Jude replied.

"Little by little," Quaisoir said. "That's how we'll understand it all. Little... by ... little."

Her voice was exhausted, and when Jude looked up she saw the miracle was leaving

Quaisoir's cells. She had sunk to the ground, her unfurled flesh withdrawing into her body,

the beatific blue fading from her skin. Jude picked herself up and hobbled from the edge of

the hole.

Hearing her footsteps, Quaisoir said, "Where are you going?"

"Just away from the well," Jude said, laying her brow and her palms against the welcome

chill of the wall. "Do you know who I am?" she asked Quaisoir, after a little time.

"Yes," came the soft reply. "You're the me I lost. You're the other Judith."

"That's right." She turned to see that Quaisoir was smiling, despite her pain.

"That's good," Quaisoir said. "If we survive this, maybe you'll begin again for both of us.

Maybe you'll see the visions I turned my back on."

"What visions?"

Quaisoir sighed. "I was loved by a great Maestro once," she said. "He showed me angels.

They used to come to our table in sunbeams. I swear. Angels in sunbeams. And I thought

we'd live forever, and I'd learn all the secrets of the sea. But I let hurt lead me out of the sun.

I let him persuade me the spirits didn't matter. Only our will mattered, and if we willed pain,

then that was wisdom. I lost myself in such a little time, Judith. Such a little time." She

shuddered. "I was blinded by my crimes before anyone ever took a knife to me."

Jude looked pityingly on her sister's maimed face. "We've got to find somebody to clean

your wounds," she said.

"I doubt there's a doctor left alive in Yzordderrex," Quaisoir replied.

“They're always the

first to go in any revolution, aren't they? Doctors, tax collectors, poets....”

“If we can't find anybody else, I'll do it,” Jude said, leaving the security of the wall and

venturing back down the incline to where Quaisoir sat.

“I thought I saw Jesus Christ yesterday,” she said. “He was standing on a roof with his arms

open wide. I thought he'd come for me, so that I could make my confession, That's why I

came here: to find Jesu. I heard his messenger.”

“That was me.”

“You were ... in my thoughts?”

“Yes.”

“So I found you instead of Christos. That seems like a greater miracle.” She reached out

towards Jude, who took her hand. “Isn't it, sister?”

“I'm not sure yet,” Jude said. “I was myself this morning. Now what am I? A copy, a forgery.”

The word brought Klein's Bastard Boy to mind: Gentle the faker, making profit from other

people's genius. Is that why he'd obsessed upon her? Had he seen in her some subtle clue to

her true nature and followed her out of devotion to the sham she was?

“I was happy,” she said, thinking back to the good times she'd shared with him. “Maybe I

didn't always realize I was happy, but I was. I was myself.”

“You still are.”

“No,” she said, as close to despair as she could ever remember being.
“I’m a piece of

somebody else.”

“We’re all pieces,” Quaisoir said. “Whether we were born or made.”
Her fingers tightened

around Jude’s hand. “We’re all hoping to be whole again. Will you
take me back up to the

palace?” she said. “We’ll be safer there than here.”

“Of course,” Jude replied, helping her up.

“Do you know which direction to go?”

She said she did. Despite the smoke and the darkness, the walls of the
palace loomed above

them, massive but remote.

“We’ve got quite a climb ahead of us,” Jude said. “It may take us till
morning.”

“The night is long in Yzordderrex,” Quaisoir replied.

“It won’t last forever,” Jude said.

“It will for me.”

“I’m sorry. That was thoughtless. I didn’t mean—”

“Don’t be sorry,” Quaisoir said. “I like the dark. I can remember the
sun better. Sun, and

angels at the table. Will you take my arm, sister? I don’t want to lose
you again.”

2

IN ANY OTHER PLACE BUT THIS, Gentle might have been frustrated by the sight of so

many sealed doors, but as Lazarevich led him closer to the Pivot Tower the atmosphere

grew so thick with dread he was glad whatever lay behind those doors was locked away. His

guide spoke scarcely at all. When he did it was to suggest that Gentle make the rest of the

journey alone.

"It's a little way now," he kept saying. "You don't need me any more."

"That's not the deal," Gentle would remind him, and Lazarevich would curse and whine,

then head on some distance in silence, until a shriek down one of the passages, or a glimpse

of blood spilled on the polished floor, made him halt and start his little speech afresh.

At no point in this journey were they challenged. If these titanic halls had ever buzzed with

activity—and given that small armies could be lost in them, Gentle doubted that they ever

had—they were all but deserted now. Those few servants and bureaucrats they did

encounter were busy leaving, burdened with hastily gathered belongings as they hurried

down the corridors. Survival was their foremost priority. They gave the bleeding soldier and

his ill-dressed companion scarcely a look.

At last they came to a door, this one unsealed, which Lazarevich refused point—blank to

enter.

“This is the Pivot Tower,” he said, his voice barely audible.

“How do I know you're telling the truth?”

“Can't you feel it?”

Now it was remarked upon, Gentle did indeed feel a subtle sensation, barely strong enough

to be called a tingle, in his fingertips, testicles, and sinuses.

“That's the tower, I swear,” Lazarevich whispered.

Gentle believed him. “All right,” he said. “You've done your duty; you'd better go.”

The man grinned. “You mean it?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, thank you. Whoever you are. Thank you.”

Before he could skip away, Gentle took hold of his arm and drew him close. “Tell your

children,” he said, “not to be soldiers. Poets, maybe, or shoeshiners. But not soldiers. Got it?”

Lazarevich nodded violently, though Gentle doubted he'd comprehended a word. His only

thought was of escape, and he took to his heels the moment Gentle let go of him and was out

of sight in two or three seconds. Turning to the beaten brass doors, Gentle pushed them a

few inches wider and slipped inside. The nerve endings in his scrotum and palms knew that

something of significance was nearby— what had been subtle sensation was almost painful

now— even though his eyes were denied sight of it by the murk of the room he'd entered. He

stood by the door until he was able to grasp some sense of what lay ahead. This was not, it

seemed, the Pivot Tower itself but an antechamber of some kind, as stale as a sickroom. Its

walls were bare, its only furniture a table upon which a canary cage lay overturned, its door

open, its occupant flown. Beyond the table, another doorway, which he took, led him into a

corridor, staler still than the room he'd left. The source of agitation in his nerve endings was

audible now: a steady tone that might have been soothing under other circumstances. Not

knowing which direction it was coming from, he turned to his right and crept down the

corridor. A flight of stairs curved out of sight to his left. He chose not to take them, his

instinct rewarded by a glimmer of light up ahead. The Pivot's tone became less insistent as

he advanced, suggesting this route was a cul-de-sac, but he headed on towards the light to

be certain Pie was not being held prisoner in one of these antechambers.

As he came within half a dozen strides of the room somebody moved across the doorway,

flitting through his field of vision too quickly to be seen. He flattened himself against the

wall and edged towards the room. A wick, set in a bowl of oil on a table, shed the light he'd

been drawn to. Beside it, several plates contained the remains of a meal. When he reached

the door he waited there for the man—the night watch, he supposed—to come back into

view. He had no wish to kill him unless it was strictly necessary. There'd be enough widows

and orphans in Yzordderrex by tomorrow morning without his adding to the sum. He heard

the man fart, not once but several times, with the abandon of someone who believed himself

alone, then heard him open another door, his footsteps receding.

Gentle chanced a glance around the doorjamb. The room was empty. He quickly stepped

inside, intending to take from the table the two knives that were lying there. On one of the

plates was an already rifled assortment of candies. He couldn't resist.

He picked the most luscious and had it to his mouth when the man behind said,

“Rosengarten?”

He looked around, and as his gaze settled on the face across the room his jaw clenched in

shock, breaking on the candy between his teeth. Sight and sugar mingled, tongue and eye

feeding such a sweetness to his brain he reeled.

The face before him was a living mirror: his eyes, his nose, his mouth, his hairline, his

bearing, his bafflement, his fatigue. In everything but the cut of his coat and the muck

beneath his fingernails, another Gentle. But not by that name, surely.

Swallowing the sweet liqueur from the candy, Gentle very slowly said, “Who ... in God's

name ... are you?"

The shock was draining from the other's face, and amusement replacing it. He shook his

head. ". . . damn kreauchee ..."

"That's your name?" Gentle replied. "Damn Kreauchee?"

He'd heard stranger in his travels. But the question only served to amuse the other more.

"Not a bad idea," he replied. "There's enough in my system. The Autarch Damn Kreauchee.

That's got a ring to it."

Gentle spat the candy from his mouth. "Autarch?" he said.

The amusement fled from the other's face. "You've made your point, wisp. Now fuck off."

He closed his eyes. "Get a hold of yourself," he half whispered. "It's the fucking kreau chee.

It's happened before, it'll happen again."

Now Gentle understood. "You think you're dreaming me, don't you?" he said.

The Autarch opened his eyes, angered to find the hallucination still hanging around. "I told

you—" he said.

"What is this kreauchee? Some kind of alcohol? Dope? Do you think I'm a bad trip? Well,

I'm not."

He started towards the other, who retreated in alarm.

"Go on," Gentle said, extending his hand. "Touch me. I'm real. I'm here. My name's John

Zacharias, and I've come a long way to see you. I didn't think that was the reason, but now

I'm here, I'm sure it was.”

The Autarch raised his fists to his temples, as if to beat this drug dream from his brain.

“This isn't possible,” he said. There was more than disbelief in his voice; there was an

unease that was close to fear. “You can't be here. Not after all these years.”

“Well, I am,” said Gentle. “I'm as confused as you, believe me. But I'm here.”

The Autarch studied him, turning his head this way and that, as though he still expected to

find some angle from which to view the visitor that would reveal him as an apparition. But

after a minute of such study he gave it up and simply stared at Gentle, his face a maze of

furrows.

“Where did you come from?” he said slowly.

“I think you know,” Gentle replied.

“The Fifth?”

“Yes.”

“You came to bring me down, didn't you? Why didn't I see it? You started this revolution!

You were out in the streets, sowing the seeds! No wonder I couldn't root the rebels out. I

kept wondering: Who is it? Who's out there, plotting against me? Execution after execution,

purge after purge, and I never got to the one at the heart of it. The one who was as clever as

me. The nights I lay awake thinking: Who is it? Who? I made a list as long as my arm. But

never you, Maestro. Never Sartori.”

Hearing the Autarch name himself was shocking enough, but this second naming bred utter

rebellion in Gentle's system. His head filled with the same din that had beset him on the

platform at Maike, and his belly disgorged its contents in one bilious heave. He put his hand

out to the table to steady himself and missed the edge, slipping to the floor where his vomit

was already spattered. Floundering in his own mess, he tried to shake the noise from his

head, but all he did was unknot the confusion of sounds and let the words they concealed

slip through.

Sartori! He was Sartori! He didn't waste breath questioning the name. It was his, and he

knew it. And what worlds there were in that naming: more confounding than anything the

Dominions had unveiled, opening before him like windows blown wide and shattered, never

to be closed again.

He heard the name spoken out of a hundred memories. A woman sighed it as she begged

him back into her disheveled bed. A priest beat out the syllables on his pulpit, pro phesying

damnation. A gambler blew it into his cupped hands to bless his dice. Condemned men made

prayers of it; drunkards, mockery; carousers, songs.

Oh, but he'd been famous! At St. Bartholomew Fair there'd been

troupes who'd filled their

purses, telling his life as farce. A bordello in Bloomsbury had boasted
a sometime nun driven

to nymphomania by his touch, who would chant his conjurations (so
she said) as she was

fucked. He was a paradigm of all things fabulous and forbidden: a
threat to reasoning men;

to their wives, a secret vice. And to the children—the children,
trailing past his house after

the beadle—he was a rhyme:

Maestro Sartori

Wants a bit o'glory.

He loves the cats,

He loves the dogs,

He turns the ladies into frogs,

He made some hats

Of baby rats;

But that's another story.

This chant, repeated in his head in the piping voices of parish
orphans, was worse in its

way than the pulpit curses, or the sobs, or the prayers. It rolled on and
on, in its fatuous way,

gathering neither meaning nor music as it went. Like his life, without
this name: motion

without purpose.

“Had you forgotten?” the Autarch asked him.

“Oh, yes,” Gentle replied, unbidden and bitter laughter coming to his
lips with the reply.

“I’d forgotten.”

Even now, with the voices rebaptizing him with their clamor, he could scarcely believe it.

Had this body of his survived two hundred years and more in the Fifth Dominion, while his

mind went on deceiving itself: holding only a decade of life in its consciousness and hiding

the rest away? Where had he lived all those years? Who had he been? If what he’d just heard

was true, this act of remembering was just the first. There were two centuries of memories

concealed in his brain somewhere, waiting to be discovered. No wonder Pie had kept him in

ignorance. Now that he knew, madness was very close.

He got to his feet, holding on to the table for support. “Is Pie ‘oh’ pah here?” he said.

“The mystif? No. Why? Did it come with you from the Fifth?”

“Yes, it did.”

A twitch of a smile returned to the Autarch’s face. “Aren’t they exquisite creatures?” he

said. “I’ve had one or two myself. They’re an acquired taste, but once you’ve got it you never

really lose it again. But no, I haven’t seen it.”

“Judith, then?”

“Ah.” He sighed. “Judith. I assume you mean Godolphin’s lady? She went by a lot of names,

didn’t she? Mind you, we all did. What do they call you these days?”

“I told you. John Furie Zacharias. Or Gentle.”

“I have a few friends who know me as Sartori. I’d like to number you

among them. Or do

you want the name back?"

"Gentle will do. We were talking about Judith. I saw her this morning, down by the harbor."

"Did you see Christ down there?"

"What are you talking about?"

"She came back here saying she'd seen the Man of Sorrows. She had the fear of the Lord in

her. Crazy bitch." He sighed. "It was sad, really, to see her that way. I thought it was just too

much kreauchee at first, but no. She'd finally lost her mind. It was running out of her ears."

"Who are we talking about?" Gentle said, thinking one or the other of them had mislaid the

path of the conversation.

"I'm talking about Quaisoir, my wife. She came with me from the Fifth."

"I was talking about Judith."

"So was I."

"Are you saying—"

"There are two. You made one of them yourself, for God's sake, or have you forgotten that too?"

"Yes. Yes, I'd forgotten."

"She was beautiful, but she wasn't worth losing the Imajica for. That was your big mistake.

You should have served your hand and not your rod. Then I'd never have been born, and God

would be in His heaven, and you'd be Pope Sartori. Ha! Is that why you came back? To

become pope? It's too late, brother. By tomorrow morning Yzordderrex will be a heap of

smoking ash. This is my last night here. I'm going to the Fifth. I'm going to build a new

empire there.”

“Why?”

“Don't you remember the rhyme they used to sing? For glory's sake.”

“Haven't you had enough of that?”

“You tell me. Whatever's in my heart was plucked from yours. Don't tell me you haven't

dreamed of power. You were the greatest Maestro in Europe. There was nobody could touch

you. That didn't all evaporate overnight.”

He moved towards Gentle for the first time in this exchange, reaching out to lay his steady

hand on Gentle's shoulder.

“I think you should see the Pivot, brother Gentle,” he said. “That'll remind you of what

power feels like. Are you steady on your feet?” “Reasonably.” “Come on, then.”

He led the way back into the passage, to the flight of stairs Gentle had declined to take.

Now he did so, following Sartori around the curve of the staircase to a door without a

handle.

“The only eyes laid on the Pivot since the tower was built are mine,” he said. “Which has

made it very sensitive to scrutiny.”

“My eyes are yours,’1 Gentle reminded him. “It’ll know the difference,” Sartori replied. “It’ll

want to . . . probe you.” The sexual subtext of this wasn’t lost on him. “You’ll just have to He

back and think of England,” he said. “It’s over quickly.”

So saying he licked his thumb and laid it on the rectangle of slate-colored stone set in the

middle of the door, inscribing a figure in spittle upon it. The door responded to the signal.

Its locks began to grind into motion.

“Spit too, huh?” Gentle said. “I thought it was just breath.”

“You use pneuma?” Sartori said. “Then I should be able to. But I haven’t got the trick of it.

You’ll have to teach me, and I’ll... remind you of a few sways in return.” “I don’t understand

the mechanics of it.” “Then we’ll learn together,” Sartori replied. “The principles are simple

enough. Matter and mind, mind and matter. Each transforming the other. Maybe that’s what

we’re going to do. Transform one another.”

With that thought, Sartori put his palm on the door and pushed it open. Though it was fully

six inches thick it moved without a sound, and with an extended hand Sartori invited Gentle

to enter, speaking as he did so.

“It’s said that Hapexamendios set the Pivot in the middle of the Imajica so that His fertility

would flow from it into every Dominion.” He lowered his voice, as if for an indiscretion. “In

other words,” he said. “This is the phallus of the Unbeheld.”

Gentle had seen this tower from the outside, of course; it soared above every other pylon

and dome in the palace. But he hadn't grasped its enormity until now. It was a square stone

tower, seventy or eighty feet from side to side and so tall that the lights blazing in the walls

to illuminate its sole occupant receded like cat's eyes in a highway till sheer distance

dimmed then erased them. An extraordinary sight: but nothing beside the monolith around

which the tower had been constructed. Gentle had been steeling himself for an assault when

the door was opened: the tone he'd heard in his skull as he'd crept along the passage below

rattling his teeth, the charge burning in his fingers. But there was nothin g, not even a

murmur, which was in its way more distressing. The Pivot knew he was here in its chamber

but was keeping its counsel, silently assessing him as he assessed it.

There were several shocks. The first, and the least, how beautiful it was, its sides the color

of thunderclouds, hewn so that seams of brightness flowed in them like hidden lightning.

The second, that it was not set on the ground but hovered, in all its enormity, ten feet from

the floor of the tower, casting a shadow so dense that the dark air was almost a plinth.

“Impressive, huh?” Sartori remarked, his cocky tone as inappropriate as laughter at an

altar. "You can walk underneath it. Go on. It's quite safe."

Gentle was reluctant, but he was all too aware that his other was watching for his

weaknesses, and any sign of fear now might be used against him later. Sartori had already

seen him sickened and down on his knees; he didn't want the bastard to get another glimpse

of frailty.

"Aren't you coming with me?" he said, glancing around at the Autarch.

"It's a very private moment," the other replied, and stood back to let Gentle venture into

the shadow.

It was like stepping back into the wastes of the Jokalaylau. Cold cut him to the marrow. His

breath was snatched from his lungs and appeared before him in a bitter cloud. Gasping, he

turned his face to the power above him, his mind divided between the rational urge to study

the phenomenon and the barely controllable desire to drop to his knees and beg it not to

crush him. The heaven above him had five sides, he saw. One for each Dominion, perhaps.

And like the hewn flanks, flickers of lightning appeared in it here and there. But it wasn't

simply a trick of seam and shadow that gave the stone the look of a thundercloud. There was

motion in it, the solid rock roiling above him. He threw a glance towards Sartori, who was

standing at the door, casually putting a cigarette between his lips. The flame he struck to

light it with was a world away, but Gentle didn't envy him its warmth.
Icy as this shadow

was, he wanted the stone sky to unfurl above him and deliver its
judgment down; he wanted

to see whatever power the Pivot possessed unleashed, if only to know
that such powers and

such judgments existed. He looked away from Sartori almost
contemptuously, t he thought

shaping in his head that for all the other's talk of possessing this
monolith, the years it had

spent in this tower were moments in its incalculable span, and he and
Sartori would have

come and gone, their little mark eroded by those that followed, in the
time it took the stone

to blink its cloudy eye.

Perhaps it read that thought from his cortex and approved, because
the light, when it

came, was kind. There was sun in the stone as well as lightning,
warmth as well as a killing

fire. It brightened the mantle, then fell in shafts, first around him,
then upon his upturned

face. The moment had antecedents: events in the Fifth that had
prophesied this, their

parent's, coming. He'd stood on Highgate Hill once, when the city road
was still a muddy

track, and looked up to see the clouds drop glory down as they were
doing now. He'd gone to

the window of his room in Gamut Street and seen the same. He'd
watched the smoke clear

after a night of bombing—1941, the Blitz at its height—and seeing the
sun burn through,

had known in some place too tender to be touched that he'd forgotten something

momentous, and that if he ever remembered—if a light like this ever burned the veil away—

the world would unravel.

That conviction came again, but this time there was more than a vague unease to support

it. The tone that had sounded in his skull had come again, attendant on the light, and in it,

described by the subtlest variation in its monotony, he heard words.

The Pivot was addressing him.

Reconciler, it said.

He wanted to cover his ears and shut the word out. Drop to the ground like a prophet

begging to be unburdened of some divine duty. But the word was inside as well as out. There

was no escaping it.

The work's not finished yet, the Pivot said.

“What work?” he said.

You know what work.

He did, of course. But so much pain had come with that labor, and he was ill equipped to

bear it again.

Why deny it? the Pivot said.

He stared up into the brightness. “I failed before, and so many people died. I can't do it

again. Please. I can't.”

What did you come here for? the Pivot asked him, its voice so tenuous he had to hold his

breath to catch the shape of the words. The question took him back to Taylor's bedside, to

that plea for comprehension.

"To understand ..." he said.

To understand what?

"I can't put it into words ... it sounds so pitiful...."

Say it.

"To understand why I was born. Why anybody's born."

You know why you were born.

"No, I don't. I wish I did, but I don't."

You're the Reconciler of Dominions. You 're the healer of the Imajica. Hide from that, and

you hide from understanding. Maestro, there's a worse anguish than remembering, and

another suffers it because you leave your work unfinished.

Go back into the Fifth Dominion and complete what you began. Make the many One. This is

the only salvation.

The stone sky began to roil again, and the clouds closed over the sun. With the darkness,

the cold returned, but he didn't relinquish his place in the Pivot's shadow for several

seconds, still hoping some crack would open and the God speak a last consoling word, a

whisper perhaps, of how this onerous duty might be passed to another soul more readily

equipped to accomplish it. But there was nothing. The vision had passed, and all he could do

was wrap his arms around his shuddering frame and stumble out to where Sartori stood.

The other's cigarette lay smoking at his feet, where it had dropped from his fingers. By the

expression on his face it was apparent that even if he'd not comprehended every detail of

the exchange that had just taken place, he had the gist.

"The Unbeheld speaks," he said, his voice as flat as the God's.

"I don't want this," Gentle said.

"I don't think this is any place to talk about denying Him," Sartori said, giving the Pivot a

queasy glance.

"I didn't say I was denying Him," Gentle replied. "Just that I didn't want it."

"Still better discussed in private," Sartori whispered, turning to open the door.

He didn't lead Gentle back to the mean little room where they'd met, but to a chamber at

the other end of the passageway, which boasted the only window he'd seen in the vicinity. It

was narrow and dirty, but not as dirty as the sky on the other side. Dawn had begun to touch

the clouds, but the smoke that still rose in curling columns from the fires below all but

canceled its frail light.

"This isn't what I came for," Gentle said as he stared out at the murk. "I wanted answers."

"You've had 'em."

"I have to take what's mine, however foul it is?"

"Not yours, ours. The responsibility. The pain"—he paused—"and the glory, of course."

Gentle glanced at him. "It's mine," he said simply.

Sartori shrugged, as though this were of no consequence to him whatsoever. Gentle saw

his own wiles working in that simple gesture. How many times had he shrugged in precisely

that fashion—raised his eyebrows, pursed his lips, looked away with feigned indifference? He

let Sartori believe the bluff was working.

"I'm glad you understand," he said. "The burden's mine."

"You've failed before."

"But I came close," Gentle said, feigning access to a memory he didn't yet have in the hope

of coaxing an informative rebuttal.

"Close isn't good enough," Sartori said. "Close is lethal. A tragedy. Look what it did to you.

The great Maestro. You crawl back here with half your wits missing."

"The Pivot trusts me."

That struck a tender place. Suddenly Sartori was shouting.

"Fuck the Pivot! Why should you be the Reconciler? Huh? Why? One hundred and fifty

years I've ruled the Imajica. I know how to use power. You don't."

"Is that what you want?" Gentle said, trailing the bait of that possibility. "You want to be

the Reconciler in my place?"

"I'm better equipped than you," Sartori raged. "All you're good for is sniffing after women."

"And what are you? Impotent?"

"I know what you're doing. I'd do the same. You're stirring me up, so I'll spill my secrets. I

don't care. There's nothing you can do I can't do better. You wasted all those years, hiding

away, but I used them. I turned myself into an empire builder. What did you do?" He didn't

wait for an answer. He knew his subject too well. "You've learned nothing. If you began the

Reconciliation now, you'd make the same mistakes."

"And what were they?"

"It comes down to one," Sartori said. "Judith. If you hadn't wanted her —" He stopped,

studying his other. "You don't even remember that, do you?"

"No," Gentle said. "Not yet."

"Let me tell you, brother," Sartori said, coming face to face with Gentle. "It's a sad story."

"I don't weep easily."

"She was the most beautiful woman in England. Some people said, in Europe. But she

belonged to Joshua Godolphin, and he guarded her like his soul."

"They were married?"

"No. She was his mistress, but he loved her more than any wife. And of course he knew

what you felt, you didn't disguise it, and that made him afraid—oh, God, was he afraid—that

sooner or later you were going to seduce her and spirit her away. It'd

be easy. You were the

Maestro Sartori; you could do anything. But he was one of your patrons, so you bided your

tune, thinking maybe he'd tire of her, and then you could have her without bad blood

between you. It didn't happen. The months went by, and his devotion was as intense as ever.

You'd never waited this long for a woman before. You started to suffer like a lovesick

adolescent. You couldn't sleep. Your heart palpitated at the sound of her voice. This wasn't

good for the Reconciliation, of course, having the Maestro pining away, and Godolphin came

to want a solution as badly as you did. So when you found one, he was ready to listen.”

“What was it?”

“That you make another Judith, indistinguishable from the first. You had the feits to do it.”

“Then he'd have one ...”

“And so would you. Simple. No, not simple. Very difficult. Very dangerous. But those were

heady days. Dominions hidden from human eyes since the beginning of time were just a few

ceremonies away. Heaven was possible. Creating another Judith seemed like small potatoes.

You put it to him, and he agreed—”

“Just like that?”

“You sweetened the pill. You promised him a Judith better than the first. A woman who

wouldn't age, wouldn't tire of his company or the company of his sons,

or the sons of his

sons. This Judith would belong to the men of the Godolphin family in perpetuity. She'd be

pliant, she'd be modest, she'd be perfect.”

“And what did the original think of this?”

“She didn't know. You drugged her, you took her up to the Meditation room in the house in

Gamut Street, you lit a blazing fire, stripped her naked, and began the ritual. You anointed

her; you laid her in a circle of sand from the margin of the Second Dominion, the holiest

ground in the Imajica. Then you said your prayers, and you waited.” He paused, enjoying this

telling. “It is, let me remind you, a long conjuration. Eleven hours at the minimum, watching

the doppelgSnger grow in the circle beside its source. You'd made sure there was nobody

else in the house, of course, not even your precious mystif. This was a very secret ritual. So

you were alone, and you soon got bored. And when you got bored, you got drunk. So there

you were, sitting in the room with her, watching her perfection in the firelight, obsessing on

her beauty. And eventually—half out of your mind with brandy—you made the biggest

mistake of your life. You tore off your clothes, you stepped into the circle, and you did about

everything a man can do to a woman, even though she was comatose, and you were

hallucinating with fasting and drink. You didn't fuck her once, you did it over and over, as

though you wanted to get up inside her. Over and over. Then you fell into a stupor at her

side.”

Gentle began to see the error looming. “I fell asleep in the circle?” he said.

“In the circle.”

“And you were the consequence.”

“I was. And let me tell you, it was quite a birth. People say they don't remember the

moment they came into the world, but I do. I remember opening my eyes in the circle, with

her beside me, and these rains of matter coming down on me, congealing around my spirit.

Becoming bone. Becoming flesh.” All expression had gone from his face. “I remember,” he

said, “at one point she realized she wasn't alone and she turned and saw me lying beside her.

I was unfinished. An anatomy lesson, raw and wet. I've never forgotten the noise she made —

”

“I didn't wake up through any of this?”

“You'd crawled away downstairs to douse your head, and you'd fallen asleep. I know

because I found you, later on, sprawled on the dining room table.”

“The conjuration still worked, even though I'd left the circle?”

“You're quite the technician, aren't you? Yes, it still worked. You were an easy subject. It

took hours to decode Judith and make her doppelganger. But you were incandescent. The

sway read you in minutes and made me in a couple of hours.”

“You knew who you were from the beginning?”

“Oh, yes. I was you, in your lust. I was you, full of drunken visions. I was you, wanting to

fuck and fuck, and conquer and conquer. But I was also you when you'd done your worst,

with your balls empty and your head empty, like death had got in, sitting there between her

legs trying to remember what it was you were living for. I was that man too, and it was

terrifying to have both those feelings in me at the same time.”

He paused a moment.

“It still is, brother.”

“I would have helped you, surely, if I'd known what I'd done.”

“Or put me out of my misery,” Sartori said. “Taken me into the garden and shot me like a

rabid dog. I didn't know what you'd do. I went downstairs. You were snoring like a trooper. I

watched you for a long while, wanting to wake you, wanting to share the terror I felt, but

Godolphin arrived before I got up the courage. It was just before dawn. He'd come to take

Judith home. I hid myself. I watched Godolphin wake you; I heard you talk together, I saw

you climb the stairs like two expectant fathers and go into the Meditation Room. Then I

heard your whoops of celebration, and I knew once and for all that I wasn't an intended

child.”

“What did you do?”

“I stole some money and some clothes. Then I made my escape. The fear passed after a

time. I began to realize what I was, the knowledge I possessed. And I realized I had thi s ...

appetite. Your appetite. I wanted glory.”

“And this is what you did to get it?” Gentle said, turning back to the window. The

devastation below was clearer by the minute, as the comet's light strengthened. “Brave

work, brother.”

“This was a great city once. And there'll be others, just as great. Greater, because this time

there'll be two of us to build it. And two of us to rule.”

“You've got me wrong,” Gentle said. “I don't want an empire.”

“But it's bound to come,” Sartori said, fired up with this vision.

“You're the Reconciler,

brother. You're the healer of the Imajica. You know what that could mean for us both? If you

reconcile the Dominions there'll have to be one great city—a new Yzordderrex—to rule it

from end to end. I'll found it and administrate it, and you can be pope.”

“I don't want to be pope.”

“What do you want then?”

“Pie 'oh' pah for one. And some sense of what all this means.”

“Being born to be the Reconciler's enough meaning for anyone. It's all

the purpose you

need. Don't run from it.”

“And what were you born to do? You can't build cities forever.” He glanced out at the

desolation. “Is that why you've destroyed it?” he said. “So you can start again?”

“I didn't destroy it. There was a revolution.”

“Which you fueled, with your massacres,” Gentle said. “I was in a little village called

Beatrix, a few weeks ago—”

“Ah, yes. Beatrix.” Sartori drew a heavy breath. “It was you, of course. I knew somebody

was watching me, but I didn't know who. The frustration made me cruel, I'm afraid,”

“You call that cruel? I call it inhuman.”

“It may take you a little time to understand, but every now and again such extremes are

necessary.”

“I knew some of those people.”

“You won't ever have to dirty your hands with that kind of unpleasantness. I'll do

whatever's necessary.”

“So will I,” said Gentle.

Sartori frowned. “Is that a threat?” he said.

“This began with me, and it'll end with me.”

“But which me, Maestro? That one”—he pointed at Gentle—“or this? Don't you see, we

weren't meant to be enemies. We can achieve so much more if we

work together.” He put his

hand on Gentle's shoulder. “We were meant to meet this way. That's why the Pivot kept

silent all these years. It was waiting for you to come, and us to be reunited.” His face

slackened. “Don't be my enemy,” he said. “The thought of—”

A cry of alarm from outside the room cut him short. He turned from Gentle and started

towards the door as a soldier appeared in the passageway beyond, his throat opened, his

hand ineptly staunching the spurts. He stumbled and fell against the wall, sliding to the

ground.

“The mob must be here,” Sartori remarked, with a hint of satisfaction. “It's time to make

your decision, brother. Do we go on from here together, or shall I rule the Fifth alone?”

A new din rose, loud enough to blot out any further exchange, and Sartori left off his

counseling, stepping out into the passageway.

“Stay here,” he told Gentle. “Think about it while you wait.”

Gentle ignored the instruction. As soon as Sartori was around the corner, he followed. The

commotion died away as he did so, leaving only the low whistle from the soldier's windpipe

to accompany his pursuit. Gentle picked up his pace, suddenly fearing that an ambush

awaited his other. No doubt Sartori deserved death. No doubt they both did. But there was a

good deal he hadn't prized from his brother yet, especially concerning

the failure of the

Reconciliation. He had to be preserved from harm, at least until Gentle had every clue to the

puzzle out of him. The time would come for them both to pay the penalty for their excesses.

But it wasn't yet.

As he stepped over the dead soldier, he heard the mystif's voice. The single word it said

was: "Gentle."

Hearing that tone—like no other he'd heard or dreamt— all concern for Sartori's

preservation, or his own, was overwhelmed. His only thought was to get to the place where

the mystif was; to lay his eyes on it and his arms around it. They'd been parted for far too

long. Never again, he swore to himself as he ran. Whatever edicts or obligations were set

before them, whatever malice sought to divide them, never again would he let the mystif go.

He turned the corner. Ahead lay the doorway that led out into the antechamber. Sartori

was on the other side, partially eclipsed, but hearing Gentle's approach he turned, glancing

back into the passageway. The smile of welcome he was wearing for Pie 'oh' pah decayed,

and in two strides he was at the door to slam it in his maker's face. Realizing he was

outpaced, Gentle yelled Pie's name, but the door was closed before the syllable was out,

plunging Gentle into almost total darkness. The oath he'd made seconds before was broken;

they were divided again, before they could even be reunited. In his rage Gentle threw

himself against the door, but like everything else in this tower it was built to last a

millennium. However hard he hit it, all he got was bruises. They hurt; but the memory of

Sartori's leer when he'd talked about his taste for mystifs stung more. Even now, the mystif

was probably in Sartori's arms. Embraced, kissed, possessed.

He threw himself against the door one final time, then gave up on such primitive assaults.

Drawing a breath, he blew it into his fist and slammed the pneuma against the door the way

he'd learned to do in the Jokalaylau. It had been a glacier beneath his hand on that first

occasion, and the ice had cracked only after several attempts. This time, either because his

will to be on the other side of the door was stronger than his desire to free the women in the

ice, or simply because he was the Maestro Sartori now, a named man who knew at least a

little about the power he wielded, the steel succumbed at the first blow, and a jagged crack

opened in the door.

He heard Sartori shouting on the other side, but he didn't waste time trying to make sense

of it. Instead he delivered a second pneuma against the fractured steel, and this time his

hand passed all the way through the door as pieces flew from beneath his palm. He put his

fist to his mouth a third time, smelling his own blood as he did so, but whatever harm this

was doing him, it had not yet registered as pain. He caught a third breath and delivered it

against the door with a yell that wouldn't have shamed a samurai. The hinges shrieked, and

the door flew open. He was through it before it had struck the floor, only to find the

antechamber beyond deserted, at least by the living. Three corpses, companions to the

soldier who'd raised the alarm, lay sprawled on the floor, all opened with single slashes. He

leapt over them to the door, his broken hand adding its drops to the pools he trod.

The corridor beyond was rank with smoke, as though something half rotted was burning in

the bowels of the palace. But through the murk, fifty yards from him, he saw Sartori and Pie

'oh' pah. Whatever fiction Sartori had invented to dissuade the mystif from completing its

mission, it had proved potent. They were racing from the tower without so much as a

backward glance, like lovers just escaped from death's door.

Gentle drew breath, not to issue a pneuma this time but a call. He shouted Pie's name down

the passageway, the smoke dividing as his summons went, as though the syllables from a

Maestro's mouth had a literal presence. Pie stopped and looked back. Sartori took hold of

the mystif's arm as if to hurry it on, but Pie's eyes had already found Gentle, and it refused to

be ushered away. Instead it shrugged off Sartori's hold and took a step in Gentle's direction.

The curtain of smoke divided by his cry had come together again and made a blur of the

mystif's face, but Gentle read its confusion from its body. It seemed not to know whether to

advance or retreat.

"It's me!" Gentle called. "It's me!"

He saw Sartori at the mystif's shoulder and caught fragments of the warnings he was

whispering: something about the Pivot having hold of their heads.

"I'm not an illusion, Pie," Gentle said as he advanced. "This is me. Gentle. I'm real."

The mystif shook its head, looking back at Sartori, then again at Gentle, confounded by the

sight.

"It's just a trick," Sartori said, no longer bothering to whisper. "Come away, Pie, before it

really gets a hold. It can make us crazy."

Too late, perhaps, Gentle thought. He was close enough to see the look on the mystif's face

now, and it was lunatic: eyes wide, teeth clenched, sweat making red rivulets of the blood

spattered on its cheek and brow. The sometime assassin had long since lost its appetite for

slaughter—that much had been apparent back in the Cradle, when it had hesitated to kill

though their lives had depended upon it—but it had done so here, and the anguish it felt was

written in every furrow of its face. No wonder Sartori had found it so

easy to make the

mystif forsake its mission. It was teetering on mental collapse. And now, confronted with

two faces it knew, both speaking with the voice of its lover, it was losing what little

equilibrium it had left.

Its hand went to its belt, from which hung one of the ribbon blades the execution squad

had wielded. Gentle heard it sing as it came, its edge undulled by the slaughter it had already

committed.

Behind the mystif, Sartori said, "Why not? It's only a shadow."

Pie's crazed look intensified, and it raised the fluttering blade above its head. Gentle

halted. Another step and he was in range of the blade; nor did he doubt that Pie was ready to

use it.

"Go on!" Sartori said. "Kill it! One shadow more or less...."

Gentle glanced towards Sartori, and that tiny motion seemed enough to spur the mystif. It

came at Gentle, the blade whining. He threw himself backwards to avoid the swipe, which

would have opened his chest had it caught him, but the mystif was determined not to make

the same error twice, and closed the gap between them with a stride. Gentle retreated,

raising his arms in surrender, but the mystif was indifferent to such signs. It wanted this

madness gone, and quickly.

“Pie?” Gentle gasped. “It's me! It's me! I left you at the Kesparate! Remember that?”

Pie swung again, not once but twice, the second slash catching Gentle's upper arm and

chest, opening the coat, shirt, and flesh beneath. Gentle pivoted on his heel to avoid the

following cut, putting his already bloodied hand to the wound. Taking another stumbling

step of retreat, he felt the wall of the passageway hard against his spine. He had nowhere

else to run.

“Don't I get a last supper then?” he said, not looking at the blade but at Pie's eyes,

attempting to stare past the slaughter fugue to the sane mind that cowered behind it. “You

promised we'd eat together, Pie. Don't you remember? A fish inside a fish inside —”

The mystif stopped. The blade fluttered at its shoulder, “—a fish.”

The blade fluttered on, but it didn't descend. “Say you remember, Pie. Please say you

remember.” Somewhere behind Pie, Sartori began a new round of exhortations, but to Gentle

they were just a din. He continued to meet Pie's blank gaze, looking for some sign that his

words had moved his executioner. The mystif drew a tiny, broken breath, and the knots that

bound its brow and mouth slipped. “Gentle?” it said.

He didn't reply. He just let his hand drop from his shoulder and stood open-armed against

the wall.

“Kill it!” Sartori was still saying. “Kill it! It's just an illusion!”

Pie turned, the blade still raised. “Don't!” Gentle said, but the mystif was already starting in

the Autarch's direction. Gentle called after it again, pushing himself from the wall to stop it.

“Pie! Listen to me—”

The mystif glanced around, and as it did so Sartori raised his hand to his eye and in one

smooth motion snatched at it, extending his arm and opening his fist to let fly what it had

plucked. Not the eye itself but some essence of his glance went from the palm like a ball

trailing smoke. Gentle reached for the mystif to drag it out of the sway's path, but his hand

fell inches short of Pie's back, and as he reached again the sway struck. The fluttering blade

dropped from the mystif's hand as it was thrown backwards by the impact, its gaze fixed on

Gentle as it fell into his arms. The momentum carried them both to the ground, but Gentle

was quick to roll from under the mystif's weight and put his hand to his mouth to defend

them with a pneuma. Sartori was already retreating into the smoke, however, on his face a

look that would vex Gentle for many days and nights to come. There was more distress in it

than triumph; more sorrow than rage.

“Who will reconcile us now?” he said, and then he was gone into the murk, as though he

had mastery of the smoke and had pulled it around him to duck away behind its folds.

Gentle didn't give chase but went back to the mystif, lying where it had fallen. He knelt

beside it.

"Who was he?" Pie said.

"Something I made," Gentle said, "when I was a Maestro."

"Another Sartori?" Pie said.

"Yes."

"Then go after him. Kill him. Those creatures are the most—"

"Later."

"Before he escapes."

"He can't escape, lover. There's nowhere he can go I won't find him."

Pie's hands were clutching at the place in mid-chest where Sartori's malice had struck.

"Let me see," Gentle said, drawing Pie's fingers away and tearing at the mystif's shirt. The

wound was a stain on its flesh, black at the center and fading to a pustular yellow at its

edges.

"Where's Huzzah?" Pie asked him, breath labored.

"She's dead," Gentle replied. "She was murdered by a Nullianac."

"I"

"So much death," Pie said. "It blinded me. I would have killed you and not even known I'd

done it"

"We're not going to talk about death," Gentle said, "We're going to find some way of

healing you."

"There's more urgent business than that," Pie said. "I came to kill the Autarch —"

"No, Pie...."

"That was the judgment," Pie insisted. "But now I can't finish it. Will you do it for me?"

Gentle put his hand beneath the mystif's head and raised Pie up.

"I can't do that," he said.

"Why not? You could do it with a breath.;"

"No, Pie. I'd be killing myself." "What?"

The mystif stared up at Gentle, baffled. But its puzzle ment was short-lived. Before Gentle

had time to explain.

Pie let out a long, sorrowful sigh, in the shape of three soft words.

"Oh, my Lord."

"I found him in the Pivot Tower. I didn't believe it at first...."

"The Autarch Sartori," Pie said, as if trying the words for their music. Then, its voice a

dirge, it said, "It has a ring."

"You knew I was a Maestro all along, didn't you?"

"Of course.;"

"But you didn't tell me."

"I got as close as I dared. But I had sworn an oath never to remind you of who you were."°

"Who made you swear that oath?"

"You did, Maestro. You were in pain, and you wanted to forget your suffering."

"How did I come to forget?"

"A simple feat."

"Your doing?"

Pie nodded. "I was your servant in that, as in everything. I swore an oath that when it was

done, when the past was i'fidden away, I would never show it to you again. And oaths don't

decay."

"But you kept hoping I'd ask the right questions—"

"Yes."

"—and invite the memory back in."

"Yes. And you came close."

"In Maike. And in the mountains."

"But never close enough to free me from my responsibilty. I had to keep my silence."

"Well, it's broken now, my friend. When you're nealed—"

"No, Maestro," Pie said. "A wound like this can't be healed."

"It can and will," Gentle said, not willing to countenance the thought of failure.

He remembered Nikaetomaas¹ talk of the Dearthers' encampment on the margin of the

Second and First Dominions, where she'd said Estabrook had been taken. Miracles of healing

were possible there, she'd boasted.

"We're going to make quite a journey, my friend," he said, starting to lift the mystif up.

“Why break your back?” it said to him. “Let's say our farewells here.”

“I'm not saying goodbye to you here or anywhere,” Gentie said. “Now put your arms

around me, lover. We've got a long way to go together yet.”

3

The Comet's ascent into the heavens above Yzordderrex, and the light
it shed upon the

city's streets, didn't shame the atrocities there into hiding or cessation;
quite the other way

around. The city was ruled by Ruin now, and its court was
everywhere: celebrating the

enthronement, parading its emblems—the luckiest already dead—and
rehearsing its rites in

preparation for a long and inglorious reign. Children wore ash today,
and carried thei r

parents' heads like censers, still smoking from the fires where they'd
been found. Dogs had

the freedom of the city and devoured their masters without fear of
punishment. The carrion

birds Sartori had once tempted off the desert winds to feed on bad
meat were gathered on

the streets in garrulous hordes, to dine on the men and women who'd
gossiped there the day

before.

There were those survivors, of course, who clung to the dream of
Order and banded

together to do what they could under the new regime, digging
through the rubble in the

hope of finding survivors, dousing fires in buildings that were whole
enough to save, giving

succor to the grieving and quick dispatch for those too wounded to
bear another breath. But

they were easily outnumbered by the souls whose faith in sanity had

been shattered and met

the comet's eye with dissolution in their hearts. By midmorning, when Gentle and Pie

reached the gate that led out of the city into the desert, many of those who'd begun the day

determined to preserve something from this calamity had given up and were leaving while

they still had their lives. The exodus that would empty Yzordderrex of much of its

population within half a week had begun.

Beyond the vague instruction, gleaned from Nikaetomaas, that the encampment to which

Estabrook had been taken lay in the desert at the limits of this Dominion, Gentle was

traveling blind. He'd hoped to find somebody along the way to give him some better

directions, but he encountered nobody who looked fit enough, mentally or physically, to

lend him assistance. He'd bound the hand he'd wounded beating down the door of the Pivot

Tower as best he could before leaving the palace. The stab wound he'd sustained when

Huzzah had been snatched and the cut the mystif's ribbon blade had opened were slight

enough to cause him little discomfort. His body, possessed of a Maestro's resilience, had

survived three times a natural human span without significant deterioration, and it was

quick to begin the process of mending itself now.

The same could not be said for Pie 'oh' pah's wounded frame. Sartori's sway was

venomous, draining the mystif s strength and consciousness. By the time Gentle left the city,

the mystif was barely able to move its legs, obliging Gentle to half-hoist it up beside him. He

only hoped they found some means of transport before too long, or this journey would be

over before it was begun.

There was little chance of hitching a ride with any of their fellow refugees. Most were on

foot, and those who had transport-carts, cars, runty mules—were already laden with

passengers. Several overburdened vehicles had given up the ghost within sight of the city

gates, and those who'd paid for their ride were arguing on the roadside. But most of the

travelers went on their way with an eerie hush, barely raising their eyes from the road a few

feet in front of them, at least until they reached the spot where that road divided.

Here a bottleneck had been created, as people milled around, deciding on which of the

three routes available to them they were going to take. Straight ahead, though a

considerable distance from the crossroads, lay a mountain range as impressive as the

Jokalaylau. The road to the left led off into greener terrain, and, not surprisingly perhaps,

this was the most favored way. The least favored, and for Gentle's purposes the most

promising, was the road that lay to the right. It was dusty and badly laid, the terrain it

wound through the least lush and therefore the most likely to deteriorate into desert. But he

knew from his months in the Dominions that the terrain could change considerably within

the space of a few miles, and that perhaps out of sight along this road lay verdant pastures,

while the track behind him could just as easily lead into a wilderness. While he was standing

in the mill of travelers debating with himself, he heard a high-pitched voice and, peering

through the dust, caught sight of a small fellow—young, spectacled, bare-chested, and bald-

making his way towards him, arms raised.

“Mr. Zacharias! Mr. Zacharias!”

He knew the face, but from precisely where he couldn't recall, nor could he put a name to

it. But the man, perhaps used to being only half remembered, was quick to supply the

information.

“Floccus Dado,” he said. “You remember?”

Now he did. This was Nikaetomaas' comrade-in-arms.

Floccus snatched off his glasses and peered at Pie. “Your lady friend looks sick,” he said.

“It's not a she. It's a mystif.”

“Sorry. Sorry,” Floccus said, slipping his spectacles back on and blinking violently. “My

error. Sex was never my strong point. Is it very sick?”

“I'm afraid so.”

“Is Nikae with you?” Floccus said, peering around. “Don't tell me she's gone on ahead. I told

her I was going to wait for her here if we got separated.”

“She won't be coming, Floccus,” Gentle said.

“Why in the Hyo not?”

“I'm afraid she's dead.”

Dado's nervous tics and blinks ceased on the instant. He stared at Gentle with a tiny smile

on his face, as if he was used to being the butt of jokes and wanted to believe that this was

one. “No,” he said.

“I'm afraid so,” Gentle replied. “She was killed in the palace.”

Floccus took off his glasses again and ran his thumb and middle finger from the bridge of

his nose along his lower lids. “That's grim,” he said.

“She was a very brave woman.”

“She was that.”

“And she put up a very spirited defense. But we were outnumbered.”

“How did you escape?” Floccus asked, the inquiry innocent of accusation.

“That's a very long story,” Gentle said, “and I don't think I'm quite ready to tell it yet.”

“Which way are you heading?” Dado said.

“Nikaetomaas told me you Dearthers have an encampment of some kind, at the margin of

the First. Is that right?”

“Indeed we do.”

“Then that's where I'm going. She said a man I knewdo you know

Estabrook? — was healed

there. I want to heal Pie.”

“Then we'd best go together,” Floccus said. “It's no use my waiting here any longer. Nikae's

spirit will have passed by a long time ago.”

“Do you have any kind of transport?”

“Indeed I do,” he said, brightening. “A very fine car I found in the Caramess. It's parked

over there.” He pointed through the crush.

“If it's still there,” Gentle remarked.

“It's guarded,” Dado said, with a grin. “May I help you with the mystif?”

He put his arm beneath Pie, who had now lost consciousness completely; then they started

to make their way through the crowd, Dado shouting to clear the route ahead. His demands

were almost entirely ignored until he started shouting “Ruukassh! Ruukassh!” which had the

desired effect of dividing the throng.

“What's Ruukassh?” Gentle asked him.

“Contagious,” Dado replied. “Not far now.”

A few paces on, and the vehicle came into view. Dado had good taste in loot. Not since that

first glorious trip along the Patashoqua Highway had Gentle set eyes on a vehicle so sleek, so

polished—or so wholly inappropriate for desert travel. It was powder—blue with silver

trim, its tires white, its interior fur lined. Sitting on the hood, its leash tied to one of the

wing mirrors, was its guard and antithesis: an animal related to the ragemy—via the

hyena—and boasting the least pleasant attributes of both. It was as round and lardy as a pig,

but its back and flanks were covered with a coat of mottled fur. Its head was short -snouted

but heavily whiskered. Its ears pricked like a dog's at the sight of Dado, and it set up a round

of barks and squeals so high they made Dado sound basso profundo by contrast.

“Good girl! Good girl!” he said.

The creature was up on its stubby legs, shaking its rear in delight at its master's return. Its

belly was laden with teats, which shook to the rhythm of its welcome.

Dado opened the door, and there on the passenger seat was the reason the creature was so

defensive of the vehicle: a litter of five yapping offspring, perfect miniatures of their mother.

Dado suggested Gentle and Pie take the back seat, while Mama Sighshy, as he called her, sat

with her children. The interior stank of the animals, but the previous owner had been fond

of comfort, and there were cushions to support the mystifs head and neck. When Sighshy

herself was invited back into the vehicle the stench increased tenfold, and she growled at

Gentle in a less than friendly manner, but Dado placated her with baby talk, and she was

soon curled up on the seat beside him, suckling her fat babes. With the travelers assembled,

they headed off towards the mountains.

Exhaustion claimed Gentle after a mile or two, and he slept, his head on Pie's shoulder. The

road steadily deteriorated over the next few hours, and the discomfort of the journey

repeatedly brought him up to the surface of sleep, with scraps of dreams clinging to him.

They were not dreams of Yzordderrex, nor were they memories of the adventures he and Pie

had shared on their travels across the Imajica. It was the Fifth his mind was returning to in

these fitful slumbers, shunning the horrors and the murders of the Reconciled Dominions for

safer territory.

Except that it wasn't safe any longer, of course. The man he'd been in that Dominion —

Klein's Bastard Boy, the lover and the faker—was a fabrication, and he could never return to

that simple, sybaritic life again. He'd lived a lie, the scale of which even the most suspicious

of his mistresses (Vanessa, whose abandoning of him had begun this whole endeavor) could

never have imagined; and from that lie, three human spans of self-deceit had come. Thinking

of Vanessa, he remembered the empty mews house in London, and the desolation he'd felt

wandering it with nothing to show for his life but a string of broken romances, a few forged

paintings, and the clothes he was wearing. It was laughable now, but that day he'd thought

he could fall no further. Such naivete! He'd learned lessons in despair

since then numerous

enough to fill a book, the bitterest reminder lying in wounded sleep beside him.

Though it was distressing to conceive of losing Pie, he refused himself the indulgence of

denying the possibility. He'd turned a blind eye on the unpalatable too often in the past, with

catastrophic results. Now the facts had to be faced. The mystif was becoming frailer by the

hour, its skin icy, its breath so shallow that on occasion it was barely discernible. Even if all

that Nikaetomaas had said about the Erasure's healing powers proved correct, there would

be no miracle cure for such a profound malady. Gentle would have to go back to the F ifth

alone, trusting that Pie 'oh' pah would be fit enough to follow after a time. The longer he

delayed that return, the less opportunity he'd have to muster assistance in the war against

Sartori.

That war would come, he had no doubt of it. The urge to conquer burned bright in his

other, as it had perhaps once burned in him, until desire and luxury and forgetfulness had

dimmed it. But where would he find such allies? Men and women who wouldn't laugh (the

way he'd have laughed, six months before) when he started to talk about the Dominion—

hopping he'd done and the jeopardy the world was in from a man with his face? Certainly he

wouldn't find imaginations among his peer group supple enough to

embrace the vistas he

was returning to describe. They were fashionably disdainful of belief, having had the flesh-

as-star-stuff hopes of youth dashed by midnight sweats and their morning reflection. The

most he'd heard any of them confess to was a vague pantheism, and they'd deny even that

when sober. Of them all he'd only ever heard Clem espouse any belief in organized religion,

and those dogmas were as antithetical to the message he was bringing from the Dominions

as the tenets of a nihilist. Even if Clem could be persuaded from the Communion rail to join

Gentle, they would be an army of two against a Maestro who had honed his powers until

they could command Dominions.

There was one other possibility, and that was Judith. She would certainly not mock his

wanderer's tales, but she'd been treated so heinously from the start of this tragedy that he

dared not expect forgiveness from her, much less fellowship. Besides, who knew where her

true sympathies lay? Though she might resemble Quaisoir to the last hair, she'd been made

in the same bloodless womb that had produced the Autarch. Was she not therefore his

spiritual sister: not born, but made? If she had to choose between the butcher of

Yzordderrex and those seeking to destroy him, could she be trusted to side with the

destroyers, when their victory would mean she'd lose the only creature in the Imajica who

shared her condition? Though she and Gentle had meant much to each other (who knew how

many liaisons they'd enjoyed over the centuries; reigniting the desire which had brought

them together in the first place, then parting again, forgetting they'd even met?) he had to

treat her with the utmost caution from this point on. She'd been innocent in the dramas of

an earlier age, a toy in cruel and careless hands. But the woman she'd become over the

decades was neither victim nor toy, and if (or perhaps when) she became aware of her past

she was perfectly capable of revenging herself upon the man who'd made her, however

much she'd claimed to love him once.

Seeing that his passenger was now awake, Floccus gave Gentle a progress report . They

were making good time, he said. Within an hour they'd be in the mountains, on the other

side of which the desert lay,

"How long do you estimate to the Erasure?" Gentle asked him.

"We'll be there before nightfall," Floccus promised. "How's the mystif faring?"

"Not well, I'm afraid."

"There'll be no cause to mourn," Floccus said brightly, "I've known people on death's door

who were healed at the Erasure. It's a place of miracles. But then everywhere is, if we just

knew how to look. That's what Father Athanasius taught me. You were in prison with

Athanasius, weren't you?"

"I was never exactly imprisoned. Not the way he was."

"But you met him?"

"Oh, yes. He was priest at our wedding."

"You and mystif, you mean? You're married?" He whistled. "Now you, sir, are what I call a

lucky man. I've heard a lot about these mystifs, and I never heard of one getting married

before. They're usually lovers. Heartbreakers." He whistled again.

"Well, that's wonderful,"

he said. "We'll make sure she makes it, sir, don't you worry. Oh, I'm sorry. She's not a she, is

she? I've got to get that right. It's just that when I look at her—I mean it—I see a she, you

know? I suppose that's the wonder of them."

"It's part of it."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Ask away."

"When you look at her, what do you see?"

"I've seen all kinds of things," Gentle replied. "I've seen women. I've seen men. I've even

seen myself."

"But at the moment," Floccus said. "What do you see right now?"

Gentle looked at the mystif. "I see Pie," he said. "I see the face I love."

Floccus made no reply to this, and after such gushing enthusiasm Gentle knew there had to

be some significance in his silence.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“Do you really want to know?”

“I do. We're friends, aren't we? At least getting that way. Tell me.”

“I was thinking it's not good you care too much about the way she looks. The Erasure's no

place to be in love with things as they are. People heal there, but they also change, you

understand?” He took both hands off the wheel to make cupped palms, like scales. “There's

got to be a balance. Something given, something taken away.”

“What kind of changes?” Gentle said.

“Different from one to another,” Floccus said. “But you'll see for yourself, very soon. When

we get close to the First Dominion, nothing's quite as it seems.”

“Isn't that true of everything?” Gentle said. “The more I live, the less I seem to be certain

about.”

Floccus' hands were back on the wheel, his burst of sunny talk suddenly overcast. “I don't

think Father Athanasius ever talked about that,” he said. “Maybe he did. I don't remember

everything he said.”

The conversation ended there, leaving Gentle to wonder if in bringing the mystif back to

the borders of the Dominion from which its people had been exiled, returning the gr eat

transformer to a land in which transformation was a commonplace, he

was undoing the knot

Athanasius had tied in the Cradle of Chzercemit.

Jude had never been much impressed with architectural rhetoric, and she found nothing in

the courtyards or corridors of the Autarch's palace to dissuade her from that indifference.

There were some sights that put her in mind of natural splendors: smoke drifting across the

forsaken gardens like morning mist, or clinging to the cold stone of the towers like cloud to

a mountain spire. But such punnish pleasures were few. It was mostly bombast: everything

built on a scale intended to be awe—inspiring but to her eye merely monolithic.

She was glad when they finally reached Quaisoir's quarters, which for all their absurd

ornamentation were at least humanized by their excesses. And they also heard there the

first friendly voice in many hours, though its welcoming tones turned to horror when its

owner, Quaisoir's many-tailed handmaiden, Concupiscentia, saw that her mistress had

gained a twin and lost her eyes in the night she'd spent looking for salvation. Only after a

good deal of lamentation could she be persuaded to tend to Quaisoir, which she did with

trembling hands. The comet was by now making its steep ascent, and from Quaisoir's

window Jude had a panoramic view of the desolation. She'd heard and seen enough in her

short time here to realize that Yzordderrex had been ripe for the

calamity that had

overtaken it, and some in this city, perhaps many, had fanned the fire that had destroyed the

Kesparates, calling it a just and cleansing flame. Even Peccable—who hadn't got an anarchist

bone in his body had intimated that Yzordderrex's time had come. But Jude still mourned its

passing. This was the city she'd begged Oscar to show her, whose air had smelled so

temptingly spicy, and whose warmth, issuing from the Retreat that day, had seemed

paradisiacal. Now she would return to the Fifth Dominion with its ash on her soles and its

smuts in her nose, like a tourist back from Venice with pictures of bubbles in a lagoon.

"I'm so tired," Quaisoir said. "Will you mind if I sleep?"

"Of course not," Jude said.

"Is Seidux's blood still on the bed?" she asked Concupiscentia.

"It is, ma'am."

"Then I won't lie there, I think." She put out her arm. "Lead me to the little blue room. I'll

sleep there. Judith, you should sleep too. Bathe and sleep. We've got so much to plan

together."

"We do?"

"Oh, yes, sister," Quaisoir said. "But later...."

She let Concupiscentia lead her away, leaving Jude to wander through the chambers which

Quaisoir had occupied all her years of power. There was indeed a

little blood on the sheets,

but the bed looked tempting nevertheless, the scent off it dizzyingly strong. She refused its

lush blandishments, however, and moved in search of a bathroom, anticipating another

chamber of baroque excess. In fact it proved to be the only room in the suite that came

within shouting distance of restraint, and she happily lingered there, running a hot bath and

soaking some of the ashes out of her body while contemplating her misty reflection in its

black tiles.

When she emerged, her skin tingling, the clothes she'd sloughed off—which were filthy

and stinking—revolted her. She left them on the floor and, instead, putting on the most

subdued of the robes that lay scattered around the bedroom, took to the scented sheets. A

man had been killed here only a few hours before, but that thought—which would once have

driven her from the room, much less the bed—concerned her not at all. She didn't discount

the possibility that this disinterest in the bed's sordid past was in part the influence of the

scents off the pillow she laid her head upon. They conspired with fatigue, and with the heat

of the bath from which she'd risen, to induce a languor she couldn't have resisted had her

life depended upon it. The tension went from her sinews and joints; her belly gave up its

jitters. Closing her eyes, she let her sister's bed lull her into dreaming.

Even during his most despondent meditations at the Pivot pit, Sartori had never felt the

emptiness of his condition as acutely as he did now that he was parted from his other.

Meeting Gentle in the tower and witnessing the Pivot's call to Reconciliation, he'd sensed

new possibilities in the air: a marriage of self and self which would heal him into wholeness.

But Gentle had poured contempt on that vision, preferring his mystif spouse over his

brother. Perhaps he'd change his mind now that Pie 'oh' pah was dead, but Sartori doubted

it. If he were Gentle—and he was—the mystifs death would be obsessed upon and magnified

until such time as it could be revenged. The enmity between them was confirmed. There'd be

no reunion.

He shared none of this with Rosengarten, who found him up in the gazebo, guzzling

chocolate and musing on his anguish. Nor did he allow Rosengarten to recount the disasters

of the night (the generals dead, the army murdered or mutinied) for very long without

stopping him. They had plans to lay together, he told the piebald man, and it was little use

fretting over what was lost.

“We're going to go to the Fifth, you and I,” he informed Rosengarten. “We're going to build

a new Yzordderrex.”

It wasn't often he'd won a response from the man, but he got one now.
Rosengarten smiled.

"The Fifth?" he said.

"I knew it many years ago, of course, but by all accounts it's naked
now. The Maestros I

knew are dead. Their wisdoms are dishonored. The place is
defenseless. We'll take them

with such sways they won't even know they've given up their
Dominion until the New

Yzordderrex is in their hearts and inviolate."

Rosengarten made a murmur of approval.

"Make any farewells you have to make," Sartori said. "And I'll make
mine."

"We're going now?"

"Before the fires are out," the Autarch said.

It was a strange sleep Jude fell into, but she'd traveled in the country
of the unconscious

often enough to feel unintimidated there. This time she didn't move
from the room in which

she lay but luxuriated in its excesses, rising and falling like the veils
around the bed, and on

the same smoky breeze. Once in a while she heard some sound from
the courtyards far

below and allowed her eyes to flutter open for the sheer lazy pleasure
of closing them again,

and once she was woken by the sound of Concupiscentia's reedy voice
as she sang in a

distant room. Though the words were incomprehensible, Jude knew it
was a lament, full of

yearning for things that had passed and could never be again, and she

slipped back into

sleep with the thought that sad songs were the same in any language,
whether Gaelic,

Navaho, or Patashoquan. Like the glyph of her body, this melody was
essential, a sign that

could pass between Dominions.

The music and the scent she lay upon were potent narcotics, and after
a few melancholy

verses of Concupiscentia's song she was no longer sure whether she
was asleep, and hearing

the lament in her dreams, or awake, but freed by Quaisoir's perfumes
and wafted up into the

folds of silks above her bed like a dreamer. Whichever it was, she
scarcely cared. The

sensations were pleasurable, and she'd had too little pleasure of late.

Then came proof that this was indeed a dream. A doleful phantom
appeared at the door

and stood watching her through the veils. She knew him even before
he drew close to the

bed. This was not a face she'd thought of much in recent times, so it
was somewhat strange

that she'd conjured him, but conjure him she had, and there was no
denying the erotic

charge she felt at his dreamed presence. It was Gentle, perfectly
remembered, his expression

troubled the way it so often was, his hands stroking the veils as
though they were her legs

and could be parted with caresses,

"I didn't think you'd be here," he said to her. His voice was raw, and
his expression as full

of loss as Concupis-centia's song. "When did you come back?"

"A little while ago."

"You smell so sweet."

"I bathed."

"Looking at you tike this ... it makes me wish I could take you with me."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to the Fifth," he said. "I've come to say goodbye."

"From such a distance?" she said.

His face broke into an immoderate smile, and she remembered, seeing it, how easy

seduction had always been for him: how women had slid then—
wedding rings off and their

knickers down when he shone this way. But why be churlish? This
was an erotic whimsy, not

a trial. She dreamed that he saw the accusation in her eyes, however,
and was begging her

forgiveness.

"I know I've done you harm," he said.

"That's in the past," she replied magnanimously.

"Looking at you now..."

"Don't be sentimental," she said. "I don't want sentiment. I want you here."

Opening her legs, she let him see the niche she had for him. He didn't
hesitate any longer,

but pulled the veil aside and climbed onto the bed, wrenching the
robe from her shoulders

as he put his mouth against hers. For some reason, she'd conjured him tasting of chocolate.

Another oddity, but not one that spoiled his kisses.

She tugged at his clothes, but they were a dream invention: the dark blue fabric of his

shirt, its laces and buttons in fetishistic profusion, covered in tiny scales, as though a family

of lizards had shed their skins to clothe him.

She was tender from the bath, and when he let his weight descend on her, and began to

work his body against hers, the scales pricked her stomach and breasts hi the most arousing

way. She wrapped her legs around him, and he acceded to her capture, his kisses becoming

fiercer by the moment.

"The things we've done," he murmured as she kissed his face. "The things we've done...."

Her heart made her mind nimble; it leapt from memory to memory, back to the book she'd

found in Estabrook's flat all those months before—one of Oscar's gifts from the Dominions—

a manual of sexual possibilities that had shocked her at the time. Images of its couplings

appeared in her head now: intimacies that were perhaps only possible in the profligacy of

sleep, unknitting both male and female and weaving them together again in new and ecstatic

combinations. She put her mouth to her dream lover's ear and whispered to him that she

forbade him nothing; that she wanted them to share the most extreme sensations they were

capable of inventing. He didn't grin this time, which pleased her, but raised himself up on his

hands, which were plunged into the downy pillows to either side of her head, and looked

down at her with some of the same sadness he'd had on his face when he'd first arrived.

"One last time?" he said.

"It doesn't have to be the last time," she said. "I can always dream you."

"And me, you," he said with the greatest fondness and courtesy.

She reached down between their bodies and slipped off his belt, then pulled his trousers

open with some violence, unwilling to be delayed by his buttons. What filled her hand was as

silken as the fabric hiding it was rough: still only half engorged, but all the more

entertaining for that. She stroked him. He sighed as he bent his head towards her, licking her

tips and teeth, letting his chocolate-sweetened spittle run off his tongue into her mouth. She

raised her hips and moved the groove of her sex against the underside of his erection,

wetting it. He started to murmur to her, terms of endearment, she presumed, though —like

Concupis—centia's song—they were in no language she understood. They sounded as sweet

as his spittle, however, and lulled her like a cradle song, as though to slip her into a dream

within a dream. As her eyes closed she felt him raise his hips, lifting the thickness of his sex

from between her labia, and with one thrust, hard enough to stab the

breath from her, he

entered, dropping down on top of her as he did so.

The endearments ceased; the kisses too. He put one hand on her brow, his fingers laced

into her hair, and the other at her neck, his thumb rubbing her windpipe and coaxing sighs

from it. She'd forbidden him nothing and would not rescind that invitation simply because

his possession of her was so sudden. Instead, she raised her legs and crossed them behind

his back, then started to whip him on with insults. Was this the most he could give her, the

deepest he could go? He wasn't hard enough, wasn't hot enough. She wanted more. His

thrusts speeded up, his thumb tightening against her throat, but not so much it kept her

from drawing breath and expelling it again in a fresh round of provocations.

"I could fuck you forever," he said to her, his tone halfway between devotion and threat.

"There's nothing I can't make you do. There's nothing I can't make you say. I could fuck you

forever."

This was not talk she would have welcomed from a flesh-and-blood lover, but in a dream it

was arousing. She let him continue in the same mode, opening her arms and legs beneath

him, while he recited all that he would do to her, a litany of ambition that matched the

rhythm of his hips. The room her dream had raised around them split here and there, and

another seeped in through the cracks to occupy the same space: this one darker than

Quaisoir's veil-draped chamber and lit by a fire that blazed off to her left. Her dream lover

didn't fade, however; he remained with her and in her, more frenzied in his thrusts and

promises than ever. She saw him above her as if lit by the same flames that warmed her

nakedness, his face knotted and sweaty, his index of desires coming between clenched teeth.

She would be his doll, his whore, his wife, his Goddess; he would fill every hole of her,

forever and ever: own her, worship her, turn her inside out Hearing this, she remembered

the images in Estabrook's book again, and the memory made her cells swell as if each was a

tiny bud ready to burst, their petals pleasure, their scent the shouts she was making, rising

off her to draw fresh adoration from him. It came, cruel and exquisite by turns. One moment

he wanted to be her prisoner, bound to her every whim, nourished on her shit and the milk

he'd win from her breasts with suckling. The next she was less than the excrement he'd

hungered for, and he was her only hope for life. He'd resurrect her with his fuck. He'd fill her

with a fiery stream, till her eyes were washed from her head and she drowned in him. There

was more, but her cries of pleasure were mounting with every moment, and she heard less

and less. Saw less too, closing her eyes against the mingled rooms,
fire-lit and veiled, letting

her head fill with the geometries that always attended pleasure, forms
like her glyph

unraveled and reworked.

And then, just as she was reaching the first of the peaks—a range of
stratospheric heights

ahead—she felt him shudder and his thrusts stop. She didn't believe
he'd finished, not at

first. This was a dream, and she'd conjured him to perform the way
actualities never did: to

go on when lovers of flesh and blood had spilled their promises and
were panting their

apologies beside her. He couldn't desert her now! She opened her
eyes. The fire-lit chamber

had gone, and the flames in Gentle's eyes had gone with it. He had
already withdrawn, and

all she felt between her legs was his fingers, dabbling in the dribble
he'd supplied. He looked

at,her lazily.

“You almost tempt me to stay,” he said, “But I've got work to do.”

Work? What work did dreams have besides the dreamer's
commandments?

“Don't leave,” she demanded.

“I'm done,” he said.

He was getting off the bed. She reached for him, but even in sleep the
languor of the pillow

was upon her, and he was away between the veils before her fingers
came close to catching

hold. She sank back in a slow swoon, watching his figure become

remoter as the layers of

gossamer between them multiplied.

“Stay beautiful,” he told her. “Maybe I’ll come back for you when I’ve built the New

Yzordderrex.”

This made little sense to her, but she didn’t care. It was her own wretched invention, and

worthless. She let it go, the figure seeming to halt at the door as if for one backward glance,

then disappearing altogether. Her mind had no sooner let him slip than it conjured a

compensation, however. The veils at the bottom of the bed parted and the many-tailed

Concupiscentia appeared, her eyes bright with craving. She didn’t wait for any word to pass

between them but crawled up onto the bed, her gaze fixed on Judith’s groin, her bluish

tongue flicking as she approached. Jude raised her knees. The creature put her head down

and began to lick out what the dream lover had left, her silky palms caressing Jude’s thighs.

The sensation soothed her, and she watched through the slits of her drugged eyes as

Concupiscentia bathed her clean. Before she’d finished the dream grew dimmer, and the

creature was still at its caressing work when another veil descended, this so dense she lost

both sight and sensation in its folds.

4

Like galleons turned to the desert wind and in full sail before it, the tents of the Dearthers

presented a pretty spectacle from a distance, but Gentle's admiration turned to awe as the

car drew closer and their scale became apparent. They were the height of five -story houses

and more, billowing towers of ocher and scarlet fabric, the colors all the more vivid given

that the desert floor, which had been sand-colored at the outset, was now almost black, and

the heavens they rose against were gray, being the wall between the

Second Dominion and the unknown world haunted by Hapexamendios.

Floccus halted the car a quarter of a mile from the perimeter of the encampment. "I should

go ahead," he said, "and explain who we are and what we're doing here."

"Make it quick," Gentle told him.

Floccus was away like a gazelle, over ground that was no longer sand but a flinty carpet of

stone shards, like the clippings from some stupendous sculpture. Gentle looked at the

mystif, lying in his arms as if in a charmed sleep, its brow innocent of frowns. He stroked its

cold cheek.

How many friends and loved ones must he have seen pass away in the two centuries and

more of his life on earth? Though he'd wiped those griefs from his

conscious mind, could he

doubt they'd made their mark, fueling his terror of sickness and
hardening his heart over

the years? Perhaps he'd always been a philanderer and plagiarist, a
master of counterfeited

emotion, but was that so surprising in a man who knew in his gut that
the drama, however

soul-searing, was cyclic? The faces changed and changed, but the
story remained essentially

the same. As Klein had been fond of pointing out, there was no such
thing as originality. It

had all been said before, suffered before. If a man knew that, was it
any wonder love became

mechanical and death just a scene to be shunned? There was no
absolute knowledge to be

gained from either. Just another ride on the merry-go-round, another
blurred scene of faces

smiling and faces grieved.

But his feelings for the mystif had been no sham, and with good
reason. In Pie's self-

denials ("I'm nothing and nobody," it had said at the beginning) he'd
heard an echo of the

anguish he himself felt; and in Pie's gaze, so heavy with the freight of
years, seen a comr'ade

soul who understood the nameless pain he carried. It had stripped him
of his shams and

chicanery and given him a taste of the Maestro he'd been and might
be again. There was

good to be done with such power, he now knew: breaches to be
healed, rights to be restored,

nations to be roused, and hopes reawakened. He needed his

inspiration beside him if he was

to be a great Reconciler.

“I love you, Pie 'oh' pah,” he murmured.

“Gentle.”

The voice was Floccus', calling him from outside the window.

“I've seen Athanasius. He says we're to come straight in.”

“Good! Good!” Gentle threw open the door.

“Do you want help?”

“No. I'll carry Pie.” He got out, then reached back into the car and picked up the mystif.

“Gentle, you do understand that this is a sacred place?” Floccus said as he led the way

towards the tents.

“No singing, dancing, or farting, huh? Don't look so pained, Floccus. I understand.”

As they approached, Gentle realized that what he'd taken to be an encampment of closely

gathered tents was in fact a continuum, the various pavilions, with their swooping roofs,

joined by smaller tents to form a single golden beast of wind and canvas.

Inside its body, the gusts kept everything in motion. Tremors moved through even the

most tautly erected walls, and in the heights of the roof swaths of fabric whirled like the

skirts of dervishes, giving off a constant sigh. There were people up among the folds, some

walking on webs of rope as if they were solid board, others sitting in

front of immense

windows opened in the roof, their faces turned to the wall of the First World as though they

anticipated a summons out of that place at any moment. If such a summons came, there'd be

no hectic rush. The atmosphere was as measured and soothing as the motion of the dancing

sails above.

"Where do we find the doctor?" Gentle asked Floccus. "There is no doctor," he replied.

"Follow me. We've been given a place to lay the mystif down."

"There must be some kind of medical attendants." "There's fresh water and clothes. Maybe

some laudanum and the like. But Pie's beyond that. The uredo won't be dislodged with

medications. It's the proximity of the First Dominion that'll heal it."

"Then we should go outside right now," he said. "Get Pie closer to the Erasure."

"Any closer than this would take more resilience than either you or I possess, Gentle,"

Floccus said. "Now follow me, and be respectful of this place."

He led Gentle through the beast's tremulous body to a smaller tent, where a dozen plain

low beds were set, some occupied, most not. Gentle laid the mystif down in one and

proceeded to unbutton its shirt while Floccus went in search of cool water for its now-

burning skin and some sustenance for Gentle and himself. While he waited, Gentle examined

the spread of the uredo, which was too extensive to be fully examined

without stripping Pie

completely, which he was loath to do with so many strangers in the vicinity. The mystif had

been covetous of its privacy—it had been many weeks before Gentle had glimpsed its beauty

naked—and he wanted to respect that modesty, even in Pie's present condition. In fact, very

few of those who passed by even glanced their way, and after a time he began to feel the fear

lose its grip on him. There was very little more that he could do. They were at the edge of

the known Dominions, where all maps stopped and the enigma of enigmas began. What use

was fear in the face of such imponderables? He had to put it aside and proceed with dignity

and containment, trusting to the powers that occupied the air here.

When Floccus returned with the means to wash Pie, Gentle asked if he might be left alone

to do so.

“Of course,” Floccus replied. “I've got friends here. I'd like to seek them out.”

When he left, Gentle began to bathe the suppurating eruptions of the uredo, which oozed

not blood but a silvery pus, the smell of which pricked his sinuses like ammonia. The body it

fed upon seemed not only enfeebled but somehow unfocused, as though its contours and

musculature were about to become a vapor, and the flesh disperse. Whether this was the

uredo's doing or simply the condition of a mystif when life, and therefore its capacity to

shape the sight of those gazing upon it, was fading, Gentle didn't know, but it made him

think back over the way this body had appeared to him. As Judith, of course; as an assassin,

armored in nakedness; and as the loving androgyne of their wedding night in the Cradle,

that had momentarily taken his face and stared back at him like a prophecy of Sartori. Now,

finally, it seemed to be a form of burnished mist, receding from his hand even as he touched

it. "Gentle? Is that you? I didn't know you could see in the dark."

Gentle looked up from Pie's body to find that in the time he'd been washing the mystif, half

mesmerized by memory, the evening had fallen. There were lights burning at the bedsides of

those nearby, but none near Pie 'oh' pah. When he returned his gaze to the body he'd been

washing, it was barely discernible in the gloom.

"I didn't know I could either."

He stood up to greet the newcomer. It was Athanasius, a lamp in his hand. By its flame,

which was as subject to the wind's whim as the canvas overhead, Gentle saw he'd been

wounded in the fall of Yzordderrex. There were several cuts on his face and neck and a

larger, livid injury on his belly. For a man who'd celebrated Sundays by making himself a

new crown of thorns, these were probably welcome discomforts.

"I'm sorry I didn't come to welcome you earlier," he said. "But with such numbers of

casualties coming in I spend a lot of time administering last rites.”

Gentle didn't remark on this, but the fear crept back up his spine.

“We've had a lot of the Autarch's soldiers find their way here, and that makes me nervous.

I'm afraid we'll let in someone on a suicide mission, and he'll blow the place apart. That's the

way the bastard thinks. If he's destroyed, he'll want to bring everything down with him.”

“I'm sure he's much more concerned with making his getaway,” Gentle said.

“Where can he go? The word's already spread across the Imajica. There's armed uprising

in Patashoqua. There's hand-to-hand combat on the Lenten Way. Every Dominion's shaking.

Even the First.”

“The First? How?”

“Haven't you seen? No, obviously you haven't. Come with me.”

Gentle glanced back towards Pie.

“The mystif's safe here,” Athanasius said. “We won't be long.”

He led Gentle through the body of the beast to a door that took them out into the

deepening dusk. Though Floccus had counseled against what they were doing, hinting that

the Erasure's proximity could do harm, there was no sign of any consequence. He was either

protected by Athanasius or resistant to any malign influence on his own account. Either way,

he was able to study the spectacle laid before him without ill effect.

There was no wall of fog, or even deeper twilight, to mark the division between the Second

Dominion and the haunt of Hapexamendios. The desert simply faded away into nothingness,

like a drawing erased by the power on the other side, first becoming unfocused, then losing

its color and its detail. This subtle removal of solid reality, the world wiped away and

replaced with nothing, was the most distressing sight Gentle had ever set eyes on. Nor was

the similarity between what was happening here and the state of Pie's body lost on him.

"You said the Erasure was moving," Gentle whispered.

Athanasius scanned the emptiness, looking for some sign, but nothing caught his eye.

"It's not constant," he said. "But every now and then ripples appear in it." "Is that rare?"

"There are accounts of this happening in earlier times, but this isn't an area that

encourages accurate study. Observers get poetic here. Scientists turn to sonnets. Sometimes

literally." He laughed. "That was a joke, by the way. Just in case you start worrying about

your legs rhyming."

"How does looking at this make you feel?" Gentle asked him.

"Afraid," Athanasius said. "Because I'm not ready to be there."

"Nor am I," Gentle said. "But I'm afraid Pie is. I wish I'd never come, Athanasius. Maybe I

should take Pie away now, while I still can."

"That's your decision," Athanasius replied. "But I don't believe the

mystif will s urvive if

you move it. A uredo's a terrible poison, Gentle. If there's any chance of Pie being healed, it's

here, close to the First.”

Gentle looked back towards the distressing absence of the Erasure.

“Is going to nothing being healed?” he said. “It seems more like death to me.”

“They may be closer than we think, death and healing,” Athanasius said.

“I don't want to hear that,” Gentle said. “Are you staying out here?”

“For a while,” Athanasius replied. “If you do decide to go, come and find me first, will you,

so that we can say goodbye?”

“Of course.”

He left Athanasius to his void—watching and went back inside, thinking as he did so that

this would be a fine time to find a bar and order up a stiff drink. As he started back in the

direction of Pie's bed, he was brought to a halt by a voice too abrasive for this hallowed

place, and sufficiently slurred to suggest the speaker had found a bar himself and drunk it

dry.

“Gentle, you old bugger!”

Estabrook stepped into view, grinning expansively, though several of his teeth were

missing.

“I heard you were here and I didn't believe it.” He seized Gentle's hand and shook it. “But

here you are, large as life. Who'd have thought it, eh? The two of us, here."

Life in the encampment had wrought its changes on Charlie. He could scarcely have been

further from the grief-wasted plotter Gentle had met on Kite Hill. Indeed, he could almost

have passed for a clown, with his motley of pinstripe trousers, tattered braces, and

unbuttoned tunic dyed half a dozen colors, all crowned with bald head and gap-toothed

smile.

"It's so good to see you!" he kept saying, his pleasure unalloyed. "We must talk. This is the

perfect time. They're all going outside to meditate on their ignorance, which is fine for a few

minutes, but God! it gets drab. Come with me, come on! They've given me a little nook of my

own, to keep me out of the way."

"Maybe later," Gentle said. "I've got a friend here who's sick."

"I heard somebody talking about that. A mystif? Is that the word?"

"That's the word."

"They're extraordinary, I heard. Very sexy. Why don't I come and see the patient with

you?"

Gentle had no wish to keep Estabrook's company for longer than he needed to, but

suspected that the man would beat a hasty retreat as soon as he set eyes on Pie and realiz ed

the creature he'd come to gawk at was the same he'd hired to assassinate his wife. They

went back to Pie's bedside together. Floccus was there, with a lamp and an ample supply of

food. Mouth crammed, he rose to be introduced, but Estabrook barely noticed him. His gaze

was on Pie, whose head was turned away from the brightness of the lamp in the direction of

the First Dominion.

"You lucky bugger," he said to Gentle. "She's beautiful."

Floccus glanced at Gentle to see if he intended to remark on Estabrook's error in sexing the

patient, but Gentle made a tiny shake of his head. He was surprised that Pie's power to

respond to the gaze of others was still intact, especially as his eyes saw an altogether more

distressing sight: the substance of his beloved growing more insubstantial as the hours

passed. Was this a sight and understanding reserved for Maestros? He knelt beside the bed

and studied the fading features on the pillow. Pie's eyes were roving beneath the lids.

"Dreaming of me?" Gentle murmured.

"Is she getting better?" Estabrook inquired.

"I don't know," Gentle said. "This is supposed to be a healing place, but I'm not so sure."

"I really think we should talk," Estabrook said, with the strained nonchalance of a man who

had something vital to impart, but was not able to do so in present company. "Why don't you

pop along with me and have a quick drink? I'm sure Floccus will come and find you if

anything untoward happens.”

Floccus chewed on, nodding in accord with this, and Gentle agreed to go, hoping Estabrook

had some insight into conditions here that would help him to decide whether to go or stay.

“I'll be five minutes” he promised Floccus, and let Estabrook lead him off through the

lamp-lit passages to what he'd earlier called his nook.

It was off the beaten track somewhat, a little canvas room he'd made his own with what

few possessions he'd brought from Earth. A shirt, its bloodstains now brown, hung above the

bed like the tattered standard from some noteworthy battle. On the table beside the bed his

wallet, his comb, a box of matches, and a roll of mints had been arranged, along several

symmetrical columns of change, into an altar to the spirit of the pocket.

“It's not much,” Estabrook said, “but it's home.”

“Are you a prisoner here?” Gentle said as he sat in the plain chair at the bottom of the bed.

“Not at all,” Estabrook said.

He brought a small bottle of liquor out from under the pillow. Gentle recognized it from

the hours he and Huzzah had lingered in the cafe” in the Oke T'Noon. It was the ferment d

sap of a swamp flower from the Third Dominion: kloupo. Estabrook took a swig from the

bottle, reminding Gentle of how he'd supped brandy from a flask on Kite Hill. He'd refused

the man's liquor that day, but not now.

"I could go anytime I wanted to," he went on. "But I think to myself, Where would you go,

Charlie? And where would I go?"

"Back to the Fifth?"

"In God's name, why?"

"Don't you miss it, even a little?"

"A little, maybe. Once in a while I get maudlin, I suppose, and then I get drunk-drunker-and

I have dreams."

"Of what?"

"Mostly childhood things, you know. Odd little details that wouldn't mean a damn thing to.

anyone else." He reclaimed the bottle and drank again. "But you can't have the past back, so

what's the use of breaking your heart? When things are gone, they're gone."

Gentle made a noncommittal noise.

"You don't agree."

"Not necessarily."

"Name one thing that stays."

"I don't—"

"No, go on. Name one thing."

"Love."

“Ha! Well, that certainly brings us full circle, doesn't it? Love! You know, I'd have agreed

with you half a year ago. I can't deny that. I couldn't conceive of ever being out of love with

Judith. But I am. When I think back to the way I felt about her, it seems ludicrous. Now, of

course, it's Oscar's turn to be obsessed by her. First you, then me, then Oscar. But he won't

survive long.”

“What makes you say that?”

“He's got his fingers in too many pies. It'll end in tears, you see if it doesn't. You know

about the Tabula Rasa, I suppose?”

“No.”

“Why should you?” Estabrook replied. “You were dragged into this, weren't you? I feel

guilty about that, I really do. Not that my feeling guilty's going to do either of us much good,

but I want you to know I never understood the ramifications of what I was doing. If I had, I

swear I'd have left Judith alone.”

“I don't think either of us would have been capable of that,” Gentle remarked.

“Leaving her alone? No, I don't suppose we would. Our paths were already beaten for us,

eh? I'm not saying I'm a total innocent, mind you. I'm not. I've done some pretty wretched

things in my time, things I squirm to think about. But compared with the Tabula Rasa, or a

mad bastard like Sartori, I'm not so bad. And when I look out every

morning, into God's

Nowhere—”

“Is that what they call it?”

“Oh, hell, no; they're much more reverential. That's my little nickname. But when I look out

at it, I think, Well, it's going to take us all one of these days, whoever we are: mad bastards,

lovers, drunkards, it's not going to pick and choose. We'll all go to nothing sooner or later.

And you know, maybe it's my age, but that doesn't worry me any longer. We all have our

time, and when it's over, it's over.”

“There must be something on the other side, Charlie,” Gentle said.

Estabrook shook his head. “That's all guff,” he said. “I've seen a lot of people get up and

walk into the Erasure, praying and carrying on. They take a few steps and they're gone. It's

like they'd never lived.”

“But people are healed here. You were.”

“Oscar certainly made a mess of me, and I didn't die. But I don't know whether being here

had much to do with that. Think about it. If God really was on the other side of that wall, and

He was so damn eager to heal the sick, don't you think He'd reach out a little further and

stop what's going on in Yzordderrex? Why would He put up with horrors like that, right

under His nose? No, Gentle. I call it God's Nowhere, but that's only half-right. God isn't there.

Maybe He was once....”

He trailed away and filled the silence with another throatful of kloupo.

“Thank you for this,” Gentle said.

“What is there to thank me for?”

“You've helped me to make up my mind about something.”

“My pleasure,” Estabrook said. “It's damn difficult to think straight, isn't it, with this

bloody wind blowing all the time? Can you find your way back to that lovely lady of yours, or

shall I go with you?”

“I'll find my way,” Gentle replied.

He rapidly regretted declining Estabrook's offer, discovering after turning a few corners

that one lamp-lit passageway looked much like the next, and that hot only could he not

retrace his steps to Pie's bedside, he couldn't be certain of finding his way back to Estabrook

either.

One route he tried brought him into a kind of chapel, where several Dearthers were

kneeling facing a window that gave onto God's Nowhere. The Erasure presented in what was

now total darkness the same blank face it had by dusk, lighter than the night but shedding

none upon it, its nullity more disturbing than the atrocities of Beatrix or the sealed rooms of

the palace.

Turning his back on both window and worshipers, Gentle continued his search for Pie, and

accident finally brought him back into what he thought was the room where the mystif lay.

The bed was empty, however. Disoriented, he was about to go and quiz one of the other

patients to confirm that he had the right room when he caught sight of Floccus' meal, or

what was left of it, on the floor beside the bed: a few crusts, half a dozen well -picked bones.

There could be no doubt that this was indeed Pie's bed. But where was the occupant? He

turned to look at the others. They were all either asleep or comatose, but he was determined

to have the truth of this, and was crossing to the nearest bed, when he heard Floccus

running in pursuit, calling after him.

“There you are! I've been looking all over for you.”

“Pie's bed is empty, Floccus.”

“I know, I know. I went to empty my bladder—I was away two minutes, no more—and

when I got back it had gone. The mystif, not my bladder. I thought maybe you'd come and

taken it away.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Don't get angry. There's no harm going to come to it here. Trust me.”

After his discussion with Estabrook, Gentle was by no means certain this was true, but he

wasn't going to waste time arguing with Floccus while Pie was wandering unattended.

“Where have you looked?” he asked—“All around,”

“Can't you be a little more precise?”

“I got lost,” Floccus said, becoming exasperated. “All the tents look alike.”

“Did you go outside?”

“No, why?” Floccus' agitation sank from sight. What surfaced instead was deep dismay.

“You don't think it's gone to the Erasure?”

“We won't know till we look,” Gentle said. “Which way did Athanasius take me? There was

a door—”

“Wait! Wait!” Floccus said, snatching hold of Gentle's jacket. “You can't just step out there.”

“Why not? I'm a Maestro, aren't I?”

“There are ceremonies—”

“I don't give a shit,” Gentle said, and without waiting for further objections from Floccus,

he headed off in what he hoped was the right direction.

Floccus followed, trotting beside Gentle, opening new arguments against what Gentle was

planning with every fourth or fifth step. The Erasure was restless tonight, he said, there was

talk of ruptures in it; to wander in its vicinity when it was so volatile was dangerous,

possibly suicidal; and besides, it was a desecration. Gentle might be a Maestro, but it didn't

give him the right to ignore the etiquette of what he was planning. He was a guest, invited in

on the understanding that he obey the rules. And rules weren't written

for the fun of it.

There were good reasons to keep strangers from trespassing there.
They were ignorant, and

ignorance could bring disaster on everybody.

“What's the use of rules, if nobody really understands what's going on out there?” Gentle

said.

“But we do! We understand this place. It's where God begins.”

“So if the Erasure kills me, you know what to write in my obituary.
'Gentle ended where

God begins.' ”

“This isn't funny, Gentle.”

“Agreed.”

“It's life or death.”

“Agreed.”

“So why are you doing it?”

“Because wherever Pie is, that's where I belong. And I would have thought even someone

as half-sighted and short-witted as you would have seen that!”

“You mean shortsighted and halfwitted.”

“You said it.”

Ahead lay the door he and Athanasius had stepped through. It was open and unguarded.

“I just want to say—” Floccus began.

“Leave it alone, Floccus.”

“—it's been too short a friendship,” the man replied, bringing Gentle

to a halt, shamed by

his outburst.

“Don't mourn me yet,” he said softly.

Floccus made no reply, but backed away from the open door, leaving Gentle to step

through it alone. The night outside was hushed, the wind having dropped to little more than

a breeze. He scanned the terrain, left and right. There were worshipers in both directions,

kneeling in the gloom, their heads bowed as they meditated on God's Nowhere. Not wishing

to disturb them, he moved as quietly as he could over the uneven ground, but the smaller

shards of rock ahead of him skipped and rolled as he approached, as though to announce

him with their rattle and clatter. This was not the only response to his presence. The air he

exhaled, which he'd turned to killing use so many times now, darkened as it left his lips, the

cloud shot through with threads of bright scarlet. They didn't disperse, these breaths, but

sank as though weighed down by their own lethality, wrapping around his torso and legs

like funeral robes. He made no attempt to shrug them off, even though their folds soon

concealed the ground and slowed his step. Nor did he have to puzzle much over their

purpose. Now that he was unaccompanied by Athanasius, the air was determined to deny

him the defense of walking here as an innocent, as a man in pursuit of an errant lover.

Wrapped in black and attended by drums, his profounder nature was here revealed: he was

a Maestro with a murderous power at his lips, and there would be no concealing that fact,

either from the Erasure or from those who were meditating upon it.

Several of the worshipers had been stirred from their contemplations by the sound of the

stones and now looked up to see they had an ominous figure in their midst. One, kneeling

alone close to Gentle's path, rose in panic and fled, uttering a prayer of protection. Another

fell prostrate, sobbing. Rather than intimidate them further with his gaze, Gentle turned his

eyes on God's Nowhere, scouring the ground close to the margin of solid earth and void for

some sign of Pie 'oh' pah. The sight of the Erasure no longer distressed him as it had when

he'd first stepped out here with Athanasius. Clothed as he was, and thus announced, he came

before the void as a man of power. For him to have attempted the rites of Reconciliation, he

must have made his peace with this mystery. He had nothing to fear from it.

By the time he set eyes on Pie 'oh' pah he was three or four hundred yards from the door,

and the assembly of meditators had thinned to a brave few who'd wandered from the mam

knot of the congregation in search of solitude. Some had already retreated, seeing him

approach, but a stoical few kept their praying places and let this stranger pass by without so

much as glancing up at him. Now so folded in sable breath he feared Pie would not recognize

him, Gentle began to call the mystif's name. The call went unacknowledged. Though the

mystif's head was no more than a dark blur in the murk, Gentle knew what its hungry eyes

were fixed upon: the enigma that was coaxing its steady step the way a cliff edge might coax

a suicide. He picked up his pace, his momentum moving steadily larger stones as he went.

Though there was no sign that the mystif was in any hurry, he feared that once it was in the

equivocal region between solid ground and nothingness, it would be irretrievable.

"Pie!" he yelled as he went. "Can you hear me? Please, stop!"

The words went on clouding and clothing him, but they had no effect upon Pie until Gentle

turned his requests into an order.

"Pie 'oh' pah. This is your Maestro. Stop."

The mystif stumbled as Gentle spoke, as though his demand had put an obstacle in its way.

A small, almost bestial sound of pain escaped it. But it did as its sometime summoner had

ordered and stopped in its tracks like a dutiful servant, waiting until the Maestro reached its

side.

Gentle was within ten paces, now, and saw how far advanced the process of unknitting

was. The mystif was barely more than a shadow among shadows, its

features impossible to

read, its body insubstantial. If Gentle needed any further proof that the Erasure was not a

place of healing, it was in the sight of the uredo, which was more solid than the body it had

fed upon, its livid stains intermittently brightening like embers caught by a gusting wind.

“Why did you leave your bed?” Gentle said, his pace slowed once again as he approached

the mystif. Its form seemed so tenuous he feared any violent motion might disperse it

entirely. “There's nothing beyond the Erasure you need, Pie. Your life's here, with me.”

The mystif took a little time to reply. When it did its voice was as ethereal as its substance,

a slender, exhausted plea emerging from a spirit at the edge of total collapse.

“I don't have any life left, Maestro,” it said.

“Let me be the judge of that. I swore to myself I wouldn't let you go again, Pie. I want to

look after you, make you well. Bringing you here was a mistake, I see that now. I'm sorry if

it's brought you pain, but I'll take you away—”

“It wasn't a mistake. You found your way here for your own reasons.”

“You're my reason, Pie. I didn't know who I was till you found me, and I'll forget myself

again if you go.”

“No, you won't,” it said, the dubious outline of its head turning in Gentle's direction.

Though there was no gleam to mark the place where its eyes had

been, Gentle knew it was

looking at him. "You're the Maestro Sartori. The Reconciler of the Imajica." It faltered for a

long moment. When its voice came again, it was frailer than ever. "And you are also my

master, and my husband, and my dearest brother. ... If you order me to stay, then I will stay.

But if you love me, Gentle, then please ... let... me ... go."

The request could scarcely have been made more simply or more eloquently, and had

Gentle known without question there was an Eden on the other side of the Erasure, ready to

receive Pie's spirit, he would have let the mystif go there and then, agonizing as it would be.

But he believed differently and was ready to say it, even in such proximity to the void.

"It's not heaven, Pie. Maybe God's there, maybe not.

But until we know—"

"Why not just let me go now and see for myself? I'm not afraid. This is the Dominion where

my people were made. I want to see it." In these words there was the first hint of passion

Gentle had so far heard. "I'm dying, Maestro. I need to lie down and sleep."

"What if there's nothing there, Pie? What if it's only emptiness?"

"I'd prefer the absence to the pain." The reply defeated Gentle utterly. "Then you'd better

go," he said, wishing he could find some more tender way to relinquish his hold, but unable

to conceal his desolation with platitudes. However much he wanted to

save Pie from

suffering, his sympathy could not outweigh the need he felt, nor quite annul the sense of

ownership which, however unsavory, was a part of what he felt towards this creature.

“I wish we could have taken this last journey together, Maestro,” Pie said. “But you’ve got

work to do, I know. Great work.”

“And how do I do it without you?” Gentle said, knowing this was a wretched gambit—and

half ashamed of it—but unwilling to let the mystif pass from life without voicing every

desire he knew to keep it from going.

“You’re not alone,” Pie said, “You’ve met Tick Raw and Scopique. They were both members

of the last Synod, and they’re ready to work the Reconciliation with you.” “They’re

Maestros?”

“They are now. They were novices the last time, but they’re prepared now. They’ll work in

their Dominions while you work in the Fifth.”

“They waited all this time?”

“They knew you’d come. Or, if not you, somebody in your place.”

He’d treated them both so badly, he thought, Tick Raw especially.

“Who’ll represent the Second?” he said. “And the First?”

“There was a Eurhetemec in Yzordderrex, waiting to work for the Second, but he’s dead. He

was old the last time, and he couldn’t wait. I asked Scopique to find a

replacement.”

“And here?”

“I'd hoped that honor might fall to me, but now you'll need to find someone in my place.

Don't look so lost, Maestro, please. You were a great Reconciler—”

“I failed. How great is that?”

“You won't fail again.”

“I don't even know the ceremonies.”

“You'll remember, after a time.”

“How?”

“All that we did and said and felt is still waiting in Gamut Street. All our preparations, all

our debates. Even me.”

“Memory isn't enough, Pie.”

“I know....”

“I want you real. I want you ... forever.”

“Maybe, when the Imajica is whole again and the First Dominion opens, you'll find me.”

There was some tiny hope in that, he thought, though whether it would be enough to keep

him from despair when the mystif had disappeared he didn't know.

“May I go?” Pie said.

Gentle had never uttered a harder syllable than his next. “Yes,” he said.

The mystif raised its hand, which was no more than a five-fingered wisp of smoke, and put

it against Gentle's lips.

He felt no physical contact, but his heart jumped in his chest.

“We're not lost,” Pie said. “Trust in that.” Then the fingers dropped away, and the mystif

started from Gentle's side towards the Erasure. There were perhaps a dozen yards to cover,

and as the gap diminished Gentle's heart, already pounding after Pie's touch, beat faster, its

drum tolling in his head. Even now, knowing he couldn't rescind the freedom he'd granted, it

was all he could do not to pursue the mystif and delay it just another moment: to hear its

voice, to stand beside it, to be the shadow of its shadow.

It didn't glance back, but stepped with cruel ease into the no-man's-land between solidity

and nothingness. Gentle refused to look away but stared on with a steadfastness more

defiant than heroic. The place was well named. As the mystif walked it was erased, like a

sketch that had served its Creator's purpose and was no longer needed on the page. But

unlike the sketch, which however fastidiously erased always left some trace to mark the

artist's error, when Pie finally disappeared the vanishing was complete, leaving the spot

flawless. If Gentle had not had the mystif in his memory—that unreliable book—it might

never have existed.

When he returned inside, it was to meet the stares of fifty or more people gathered at the

door, all of whom had obviously witnessed what had just happened, albeit at some distance.

Nobody so much as coughed until he'd passed; then he heard the whispers rise like the

sound of swarming insects. Did they have nothing better to do than gossip about his grief?

he thought. The sooner he was away from here, the better. He'd say his farewells to

Estabrook and Floccus and leave immediately.

He returned to Pie's bed, hoping the mystif might have left some keepsake for him, but the

only sign of its presence was the indentation in the pillow on which its beautiful head had

lain. He longed to lie there himself for a little time, but it was too public for such an

indulgence. He would grieve when he was away from here.

As he prepared to leave, Floccus appeared, his wiry little body twitching like a boxer

anticipating a blow.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," he said.

"I was coming to find you anyway," Gentle said. "Just to say thank you, and goodbye."

"Before you go," Floccus said, blinking maniacally, "I've a message for you." He'd sweated

all the color from his face and stumbled over every other word.

"I'm sorry for my behavior," Gentle said, trying to soothe him. "You did all you could have

done, and all you got for it was my foul temper,"

"No need to apologize."

"Pie had to go, and I have to stay. That's the way of it."

"It's a pleasure to have you back," Floccus gushed. "Really, Maestro, really."

That Maestro gave Gentle a clue to this performance. "Floccus? Are you afraid of me?" he

said. "You are, aren't you?"

"Afraid? Ah, well—ah, yes. In a manner of speaking. Yes. What happened out there, your

getting so close to the Erasure and not being claimed, and the way you've changed"—the

dark garb still clung about him, he realized, its slow dispersal draping shreds of smoke

around his limbs—"it puts a different complexion on things. I hadn't understood; forgive me,

it was stupid; I hadn't understood, you know, that I was in the company of, well, such a

power. If I, you know, caused any offense—"

"You didn't."

"I can be frivolous."

"You were fine company, Floccus."

"Thank you, Maestro. Thank you. Thank you."

"Please stop thanking me."

"Yes. I will. Thank you."

“You said you had a message.”

“I did? I did.”

“Who from?”

“Athanasius. He'd like very much to see you.”

Here was the third farewell he owed, Gentle thought. “Then take me to him, if you would,”

he said, and Floccus, his face flooded with relief that he'd survived this interview, turned

and led him from the empty bed.

In the few minutes it took for them to thread their way through the body of the tent, the

wind, which had dropped almost to nothing at twilight, began to rise with fresh ferocity. By

the time Floccus ushered him into the chamber where Athanasius waited, it was beating at

the walls wildly, The lamps on the floor flickered with each gust, and by their panicky light

Gentle saw what a melancholy place Athanasius had chosen for their parting. The chamber

was a mortuary, its floor littered with bodies wrapped in every kind of rag and shroud, some

neatly parceled, most barely covered: further proof—as if it were needed—of how poor a

place of healing this was. But that argument was academic now. This was neither the time

nor the place to bruise the man's faith, not with the night wind thrashing at the walls and

the dead everywhere underfoot.

“Do you want me to stay?” Floccus asked Athanasius, clearly desperate to be shunned.

“No, no. Go by all means,” the other replied. Floccus turned to Gentle and made a little bow.

“It was an honor, sir,” he said, then beat a hasty retreat.

When Gentle looked back towards Athanasius, the man had wandered to the far end of the

mortuary and was staring down at one of the shrouded bodies. He had dressed for this

somber place, the loose bright garb he'd been wearing earlier discarded in favor of robes so

deep a blue they were practically black.

“So, Maestro,” he said. “I was looking for a Judas in our midst and I missed you. That was

careless, eh?”

His tone was conversational, which made a statement Gentle already found confusing

doubly so.

“What do you mean?” he said.

“I mean you tricked your way into our tents, and now you expect to depart without p aying

a price for your desecration.”

“There was no trick,” Gentle said. “The mystif was sick, and I thought it could be healed

here. If I failed to observe the formalities out there, you'll excuse me. I didn't have time to

take a theology lesson.”

“The mystif was never sick. Or if it was you sickened it yourself, so you could worm your

way in here. Don't even bother to protest. I saw what you did out

there. What's the mystif

going to do, make some report on us to the Unbeheld?"

"What are you accusing me of exactly?"

"Do you even come from the Fifth, I find myself wondering, or is that also part of the plot?"

"There is no plot."

"Only I've heard that revolution and theology are bad bedfellows there, which of course

seems strange to us. How can one ever be separated from the other? If you want to change

even a little part of your condition, you must expect the consequences to reach the ears of

divinities sooner or later, and then you must have your reasons ready."

Gentle listened to all of this, wondering if it might not be simplest to quit the room and

leave Athanasius to ramble. Clearly none of this really made any sense. But he owed the man

a little patience, perhaps, if only for the words of wisdom he'd bestowed at the wedding.

"You think I'm involved in some conspiracy," Gentle said. "Is that it?"

"I think you're a murderer, a liar, and an agent of the Autarch," Athanasius said,

"You call me a liar? Who's the one who seduced all these poor fuckers into thinking they

could be healed here, you or me? Look at them!" He pointed along the rows. "You call this

healing? I don't. And if they had the breath—"

He reached down and snatched the shroud off the corpse closest to him. The face beneath

was that of a pretty woman. Her open eyes were glazed. So was her face: painted and glazed.

Carved, painted, and glazed. He tugged the sheet farther back, hearing Athanasius' hard,

humorless laugh as he did so. The woman had a painted child perched in the crook of her

arm. There was a gilded halo around its head, and its tiny hand was raised in benediction.

"She may lie very still," Athanasius said. "But don't be deceived. She's not dead,"

Gentle went to another of the bodies and drew back its covering. Beneath lay a second

Madonna, this one more baroque than the first, its eyes turned up in a beatific swoon. He let

the shroud drop from between his fingers.

"Feeling weak, Maestro?" Athanasius said. "You conceal your fear very well, but you don't

deceive me."

Gentle looked around the room again. There were at least thirty bodies laid out here. "Are

all of them Madonnas?" he said.

Reading Gentle's bewilderment as anxiety, Athanasius said, "Now I begin to see the fear.

This ground is sacred to the Goddess." "Why?"

"Because tradition says a great crime was committed against Her sex near this spot. A

woman from the Fifth Dominion was raped hereabouts, and the spirit of the Holy Mother

calls sacred any ground thus marked." He went down on his haunches and uncovered

another of the statues, touching it reverentially. "She's with us here," he said. "In every

statue. In every stone. In every gust of wind. She blesses us, because we dare to come so

close to Her enemy's Dominion."

"What enemy?"

"Are you not allowed to utter his name without dropping to your knees?" Athanasius said.

"Hapexamendios. Your Lord, the Unbeheld. You can confess it. Why not? You know my secret

now, and I know yours. We're transparent to each other. I do have one question, however,

before you leave." "What's that?"

"How did you find out we worship the Goddess? Was it Floccus who told you or

Nikaetomaas?"

"Nobody. I didn't know and I don't much care." He started to walk towards the man. "I'm

not afraid of your Virgins, Athanasius."

He chose one nearby and unveiled her, from starry crown to cloud-treading toe. Her hands

were clasped in prayer. Stooping, just as Athanasius had, Gentle put his hand over the

statue's knitted fingers.

"For what it's worth," he said, "I think they're beautiful. I was an artist once myself. "

"You're strong. Maestro, I'll say that for you. I expected you to be brought to your knees by

Our Lady.”

“First I'm supposed to kneel for Hapexamendios; now for the Virgin.”

“One in fealty, one in fear.”

“I'm sorry to disappoint you, but my legs are my own. I'll kneel when I choose to. If I

choose to.”

Athanasius looked puzzled. “I think you half believe that,” he said.

“Damn right I do. I don't know what kind of conspiracy you think I'm guilty of, but I swear

there's none.”

“Maybe you're more His instrument than I thought,” Athanasius said.

“Maybe you're

ignorant of His purpose.”

“Oh, no,” Gentle said. “I know what work I'm meant to do, and I see no reason to be

ashamed of it. If I can reconcile the Fifth I will. I want the Imajica whole, and I'd have

thought you would too. You can visit the Vatican. You'll find it's full of Madonnas.”

As though inspired to fury by his words, the wind beat at the walls with fresh venom, a

gust finding its way into the chamber, raising several of the lighter shrouds into the air and

extinguishing one of the lamps.

“He won't save you,” Athanasius said, clearly believing this wind had come to carry Gentle

away. “Nor will your ignorance, if that's what's kept you from harm.”

He looked back towards the bodies he'd been studying as Floccus departed.

“Lady, forgive us,” he said, “for doing this in your sight.”

The words were a signal, it seemed. Four of the figures moved as he spoke, sitting up and

pulling the shrouds from their heads. No Madonnas these. They were men and women of the

Dearth, carrying blades like crescent moons. Athanasius looked back at Gentle.

“Will you accept the blessing of Our Lady before you die?” he said.

Somebody had already begun a prayer behind him, Gentle heard, and he glanced around to

see that there were another three assassins there, two of them armed in the same lunatic

fashion, the third—a girl no more than Huzzah's age, bare—breasted, doe-faced-darting

between the rows uncovering statues as she went. No two were alike. There were Virgins of

stone, Virgins of wood, Virgins of plaster. There were Virgins so crudely carved they were

barely recognizable, and others so finely hewn and finished they looked ready to draw

breath. Though minutes before, Gentle had laid his hand on one of this number without

harm, the spectacle faintly sickened him. Did Athanasius know something about the

condition of Maestros that he, Gentle, didn't? Might he somehow be subjugated by this

image, the way in an earlier life he'd been enthralled by the sight of a woman naked, or

promising nakedness?

Whatever mystery was here, he wasn't about to let Athanasius murder him while he

puzzled it out. He drew breath and put his hand to his mouth as Athanasius drew a weapon

of his own and started towards him at speed. The breath proved faster than the blade.

Gentle unleashed the pneuma, not at Athanasius directly, but at the ground in front of him.

The stones it struck flew into pieces, and Athanasius fell back as the fusillade hit him. He

dropped his knife and clamped his hands to his face, yelling as much in rage as in pain. If

there was a command in his clamor the assassins missed or ignored it. They kept a

respectful distance from Gentle as he walked towards their wounded leader, through an air

still gray with motes of pulverized stone. Athanasius was lying on his side, propped on his

elbow. Gentle went down on his haunches beside the man and carefully drew Athanasius'

hands from his face. There was a deep cut beneath his left eye, and another above his right.

Both were bleeding copiously, as were a score of littler cuts. None of them, however, would

be calamitous for a man who wore wounds the way others wore jewelry. They would heal

and add to his sum of scars.

"Call your assassins off, Athanasius," Gentle told him. "I didn't come here to hurt anybody,

but if you press me to k I'll kill every last one of them. Do you understand me?" He put his

arm beneath the man and hauled him to his feet. "Now call them off."

Athanasius shrugged himself free of Gentle's hold and scanned his

cohorts through a

drizzle of blood.

“Let him pass,” he said. “There’ll be another time.”

The assassins between Gentle and the door parted, though none of them lowered or

sheathed their weapons. Gentle stood up and left Athanasius' side, passing only to offer one

final observation.

“I wouldn't want to kill the man who married me to Pie 'oh' pah,” he said, “so before you

come after me again, examine the evidence against me, whatever it is. And search your heart.

I'm not your enemy. All I want to do is to heal Imajica. Isn't that what your Goddess wants

too?”

If Athanasius had wanted to respond, he was too slow. Before he could open his mouth a

cry rose from somewhere outside, and a moment later another, then another, then a dozen:

all howls of pain and panic, twisted into eardrum—bruising screeches by the gusts that

carried them. Gentle turned back to the door, but the wind had hold of the entire chamber,

and even as he made to depart, one of the walls rose as if a titanic hand had seized hold of it

and lifted it up into the air. The wind, bearing its freight of screams, rushed in, flinging the

lamps over, their fuel spilled as they rolled before it. Caught by the very flames it had fed,

the oil burst into bright yellow balls, by which light Gentle saw scenes of chaos on all sides.

The assassins were being thrown over like the lamps, unable to withstand the power of the

wind. One he saw impaled on her own blade. Another was carried into the oil and was

instantly consumed by flame.

“What have you summoned?” Athanasius yelled.

“This isn't my doing,” Gentle replied.

Athanasius screeched some further accusation, but it was snatched from his lips as the

rampage escalated. Another of the chamber's walls was summarily snatched away, its tatters

rising into the air like a curtain to unveil a scene of catastrophe. The storm was at work

throughout the length of the tents, disemboweling the glorious and scarlet beast Gentle had

entered with such awe. Wall after wall was shredded or wrenched from the ground, the

ropes and pegs that had held them lethal as they flew. And visible beyond the turmoil, its

cause: the once featureless wall of the Erasure, featureless no longer. It roiled the way the

sky Gentle had seen beneath the Pivot had roiled, a maelstrom whose place of origin seemed

to be a hole torn in the Erasure's fabric. The sight gave substance to Athanasius' charges.

Threatened by assassins and Madonnas, had Gentle unwittingly summoned some entity out

of the First Dominion to protect him? If so, he had to find it and subdue it before he had

more innocent lives to add to the roster of those who'd perished because of him.

With his eyes fixed on the tear, he vacated the chamber and headed towards the Erasure.

The route between was the storm's highway. It carried the detritus of its deeds back and

forth, returning to places it had already destroyed in its first assault to pick up the survivors

and pitch them into the air like sacks of bloody down, tearing them open up above. There

was a red rain in the gusts, which spattered Gentle as he went, yet the same authority that

was condemning men and women all around left him untouched. It could not so much as

knock him off his feet. The reason? His breath, which Pie had once called the source of all

magic. Its cloak clung to him as it had before, apparently protecting him from the tumult,

and, though it didn't impede his steps, it lent him a mass beyond that of flesh and bone.

With half the distance covered, he glanced back to see if there was any sign of life among

the Madonnas. The place was easy to find, even amid this carnage; the fire burned with a

wind-fed fervor, and through air thickened by blood and shards Gentle saw that several of

the statues had been raised from their stony beds and now formed a circle in which

Athanasius and several of his followers were taking shelter. They'd offer little defense

against this havoc, he thought, but several other survivors could be seen crawling toward s

the place, eyes fixed on the Holy Mothers.

Gentle turned his back on the sight and strode on towards the Erasure, catching sight — of

another soul here weighty enough to resist the assault: a man in robes the color of the

shredded tents, sitting cross-legged on the ground no more than twenty yards from the

fury's source. His head was hooded, his face turned towards the maelstrom. Was this

monkish creature the force he'd summoned? Gentle wondered. If not, how was this fellow

surviving so close to the engine of destruction?

He started to yell to the man as he approached, by no means certain that his voice would

carry in the din of wind and screams. But the monk heard. He looked round at Gentle, the

hood half eclipsing his face. There was nothing untoward about his placid features. His face

was in need of a shave; his nose, which had been broken at some time, in need of resetting;

his eyes in need of nothing. They had all they wanted, it seemed, seeing the Maestro

approach. A broad grin broke over the monk's face, and he instantly rose to his feet, bowing

his head.

"Maestro," he said. "You do me honor." His voice wasn't raised, but it carried through the

commotion. "Have you seen the mystif yet?"

"The mystif s gone," Gentle said. He didn't need to yell, he realized.

His voice, like his limbs,
carried an unnatural weight here.

"Yes, I saw it go," the monk replied, "But it's come back, Maestro. It broke through the

Erasure, and the storm came after it."

"Where? Where?" Gentle said, turning full circle. "I don't see it!" He looked accusingly at

the man. "It would have found me if it was here," he said.

"Trust me, it's trying," the man replied. He pulled back his hood. His gingery curls were

thinning, but there was the vestige of a chorister's charm there. "It's very close, Maestro."

Now it was he who stared into the storm: not to left and right, however, but up into the

labyrinthine air. Gentle followed his gaze. There were swaths of tattered canvas on the wind

high above them, rising and falling like vast wounded birds. There were pieces of furniture,

shredded clothes, and fragments of flesh. And in among these clouds of dross, a darting form

darker than either sky or storm, descending even as he set his eyes upon it. The monk drew

closer to Gentle.

"That's the mystif," he said. "May I protect you, Maestro?"

"It's my friend," Gentle said. "I don't need protecting." "I think you do," the other replied,

and raised his arms above his head, palms out as if to deflect the approaching spirit.

It slowed at the sight of this gesture, and Gentle had time to see the form above him

plainly. It was indeed the mystif, or its remains. Either by stealth or sheer force of will it had

breached the Erasure. But its escape had brought it no comfort whatsoever. The uredo

burned more venomously than ever, almost entirely consuming the shadow body it had fixed

upon and poisoned; and from the sufferer's mouth, a howl that could not have been more

pained had its guts been drawn out of its belly in front of its eyes.

It had come to a complete halt now and hovered above the two men like a diver arrested in

mid-descent, arms outstretched, head, or its traces, thrown back.

"Pie?" Gentle said. "Have

you done this?" The howl went on. If there were words in its anguish, Gentle couldn't make

them out.

"I have to speak to it," Gentle said to his protector. "If you're causing it pain, for God's sake

stop."

"It came out of the margin howling like this," the man said.

"At least drop your defenses." "It'll attack us." "I'll take that risk," he replied.

The man let his shunning hands fall to his side. The form above them twisted and turned

but did not descend. Another force had a claim upon it, Gentle realized. It was thrashing to

resist a summons from the Erasure, which was calling it back into the place from which it

had escaped.

"Can you hear me, Pie?" Gentle asked it.

The howl went on, unabated.

“If you can speak, do it!”

“It's already speaking,” the monk said.

“I only hear howls,” Gentle said.

“Past the howls,” came the reply, “there are words.”

Drops of fluid fell from the mystif's wounds as its struggles to resist the Erasure's power

intensified. They stank of putrescence and burned Gentle's upturned face, but their sting

brought comprehension of the words encoded in Pie's screeches.

“Undone,” the mystif was saying. “We're... undone....”

“Why did you do this?” Gentle asked.

“It wasn't... me. The storm was sent to claim me back.”

“Out of the First?”

“It's... His will,” Pie said. “His... will....”

Though the tortured form above him resembled the creature he'd loved and wed scarcely

at all, Gentle could still hear fragments of Pie 'oh' pah in these replies and, hearing them,

wanted to raise his own voice in anguish at the thought of Pie's pain. The mystif had gone

into the First to end its suffering; but here it was, suffering still, and he was powerless to

help it or heal it. All he could do by way of comfort was tell it that he understood, which he

did. Its message was perfectly clear. In the trauma of their parting Pie had sensed some

equivocation in him. But there was none, and he said so.

“I know what I have to do,” he told the sufferer. “Trust me, Pie. I understand. I’m the

Reconciler. I’m not going to run from that.”

At this, the mystif writhed like a fish on a hook, no longer able to keep itself from being

hauled in by the fisherman in the First. It started to scrabble at the air, as if it might gain

another moment in this Dominion by catching hold of a mote. But the power that had sent

such furies in pursuit of it had too strong a hold, and the spirit was drawn back towards the

Erasure. Instinctively Gentle reached up towards it, hearing and ignoring a cry of alarm from

the man at his side. The mystif reached for his hand, extending its shadowy substance to do

so, and curling grotesquely long fingers around Gentle’s. The contact sent such a convulsion

through his system he would have been thrown to the ground but that his protector took

hold of him. As it was his marrow seemed to burn in his bones, and he smelled the stench of

rot off his skin, as though death were coming upon him inside and out. It was hard, in that

agony, to hold on to the mystif, much less to the words it was trying to say. But he fought the

urge to let go, struggling for the sense of the few syllables he was able to grasp. Three of

them were his name.

“Sartori...”

"I'm here, Pie," Gentle said, thinking perhaps the thing was blinded now. "I'm still here."

But the mystif wasn't naming its Maestro. "The other," it said. "The other..." "What about

him?"

"He knows," Pie murmured. "Find him, Gentle. He knows."

With this command, their fingers separated. The mystif reached to take hold of Gentle

again, but with its frail hold lost it was prey to the Erasure and was instantly snatched

towards the tear through which it had appeared. Gentle started after it, but his limbs had

been more severely traumatized by the convulsion than he'd thought, and his legs simply

folded up beneath him. He fell heavily, but raised his head in time to catch sight of the mystif

disappearing into the void. Sprawled on the hard ground, he remembered his first pursuit of

Pie, through the empty, icy streets of Manhattan. He'd fallen then, too, and looked up as he

did now to see the riddle escaping him, unsolved. But it had turned that first time; turned

and spoken to him across the river of Fifth Avenue, offering him the hope, however frail, of

another meeting. Not so now. It went into the Erasure like smoke through a drafty door, its

cry stopping dead.

"Not again," Gentle murmured.

The monk was crouching at his side. "Can you stand," he asked, "or shall I get help?"

Gentle put his hands beneath him and pushed himself up into a kneeling position, making

no reply to the question. With the mystif's disappearance, the malignant wind that had come

after it, and brought such devastation, was dropping away, and as it did so the debris it had

been keeping aloft descended in a grim hail. For a second time the monk raised his hands to

ward off the descending force. Gentle was barely aware of what was happening. His eyes

were on the Erasure, which was rapidly losing its roiling motion. By the time the rain of

canvas, stones, and bodies had stopped, every last trace of detail had gone from the divide,

and it was once again an absence over which the eye slid, finding no purchase.

Gentle got to his feet and, turning his eyes from the nullity, scanned the desolation that lay

in every other direction but one. The circle of Madonnas he'd glimpsed through the storm

was still intact, and sheltering in its midst were half a hundred survivors, some of them on

their knees sobbing or praying, many kissing the feet of the statues that had shielded them,

still others gazing towards the Erasure from which the destruction that claimed all but these

fifty, plus the Maestro and the monk, had come.

"Do you see Athanasius?" Gentle asked the man at his side.

"No, but he's alive somewhere," came the reply. "He's like you, Maestro; he's got too much

purpose in him to die.”

“I don't think any purpose would have saved me if you hadn't been here,” Gentle remarked.

“You've got real power in your bones.”

“A little, maybe,” the monk replied, with a modest smile. “I had a fine teacher.”

“So did I,” Gentle said softly. “But I lost it.” Seeing the Maestro's eyes filling, the monk

made to withdraw, but Gentle said, “Don't worry about the tears. I've been running from

them too long. Let me ask you something. I'll quite understand if you say no.”

“What, Maestro?”

“When I leave here, I'm going back to the Fifth to prepare for a Reconciliation. Would you

trust me enough to join the Synod; to represent the First?”

The monk's face broke into bliss, shedding years as he smiled, “It would be my honor,

Maestro,” he said.

“There's risk in it,” Gentle warned.

“There always was. But I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you.”

“How so?”

“You're my inspiration, Maestro,” the man replied, inclining his head in deference.

“Whatever you require of me, I'll perform as best I can.”

“Stay here, then. Watch the Erasure and wait. I'll find you when the time comes.” He spoke

with more certainty than he felt, but then perhaps the illusion of competence was part of

every Maestro's repertoire.

"I'll be waiting," the monk replied.

"What's your name?"

"When I joined the Dearthers they called me Chicka Jackeen."

"Jackeen?"

"It means worthless fellow," the man replied.

"Then we've got much in common," Gentle said. He took the man's hand and shook it.

"Remember me, Jackeen."

"You've never left my mind," the man replied.

There was some subtext here Gentle couldn't grasp, but this was no time to delve. He had

two demanding and dangerous journeys ahead of him: the first to Yzordderrex, the second

from that city back to the Retreat. Thanking Jackeen for his good offices, Gentle left him at

the Erasure and picked his way back through the devastation towards the circle of

Madonnas. Some of the survivors were leaving its shelter to begin a search of the site,

presumably in the hope—vain, he suspected—of finding others alive. It was a scene of grief

and bewilderment he'd witnessed too many times on his journey through the Dominions.

Much as he would have liked to believe it was mere happenstance that these scenes of

devastation coincided with his presence, he couldn't afford to indulge such self-delusion. He

was as surely wedded to the storm as he was to Pie. More so now,

perhaps, with the mystif

gone.”

Jackeen's observation that Athanasius was too purposeful a soul to have perished was

confirmed as Gentle drew closer to the circle. The man was standing at the center of a knot

of Dearthers, leading a prayer of thanks to the Holy Mother for their survival. As Gentle

reached the perimeter, Athanasius raised his head. One eye was closed beneath a scab of

blood and dirt, but there was enough hatred in the other to burn in a dozen eyes. Meeting its

gaze, Gentle advanced no further, but the priest dropped the volume of his prayer to a

whisper anyway, preventing the trespasser from hearing the terms of his devotion. Gentle's

ears were not so dulled by the din he didn't catch a few of the phrases, however. Though the

woman represented in so many modes around the circle was clearly the Virgin Mary, she

appar—” ently went by other names here; or else had sisters. He heard her called Uma

Umagammagi, Mother Imajica; and heard too the name Huzzah had first whispered to him in

her cell beneath the maison de sante: Tishalull6. There was a third, though it took Gentle a

little time to be certain he'd understood the naming aright, and that was Jokalaylau.

Athanasius prayed that she'd keep a place for them at her side in the snows of pa radise,

which made Gentle wonder rather sourly if the man had ever trodden those wastes, that he

could think them a heavenly place.

Though the names were strange, the inspiring spirit was not. Athanasius and his forlorn

congregation were praying to the same loving Goddess at whose shrines in the Fifth

countless candles were lit every day. Even Gentle at his most pagan had conceded the

presence of that woman in his life and worshiped her the only way he'd known how: with

the seduction and temporary possession of her sex. Had he known a mother or a loving

sister he might have learned a better devotion than lust, but he hoped and believed the Holy

Woman would forgive him his trespasses, even if Athanasius would not. The thought

comforted him. He would need all the protection he could assemble in the battle that lay

ahead, and it was no little solace to think that the Mother Imajica had her worshiping places

in the Fifth, where that battle would be fought.

With the ad hoc service over, Athanasius let his congregation go about the business of

searching the wreckage. For his part, he stayed in the middle of the circle, where a few

survivors who'd made it that far, but perished, lay sprawled.

"Come here, Maestro," Athanasius said. "There's something you should see."

Gentle stepped into the circle, expecting Athanasius to show him the corpse of a child or

some fragile beauty, broken. But the face at his feet was male, and far from innocent.

“You knew him, I think.”

“Yes. His name was Estabrook.”

Charlie's eyes were closed, his mouth too: sealed up in the moment of his passing. There

was very little sign of physical damage. Perhaps his heart had simply given out in the

excitement.

“Nikaetomaas said you brought him here because you thought he was me.”

“We thought he was a Messiah,” Athanasius said. “When we realized he wasn't we kept

looking, expecting a miracle. Instead—”

“You got me. For what it's worth, you were right. I did bring all this destruction with me. I

don't quite know why, and I don't expect you to forgive me for it, but I want you to

understand that I take no pleasure in it. All I want to do is make good the damage I've done.”

“And how will you do that, Maestro?” Athanasius said. His one good eye brimmed with

tears as he surveyed the bodies. “How will you make this good? Can you resurrect them with

what's between your legs? Is that the trick of it? Can you fuck them back into life?”

Gentle made a guttural sound of disgust.

“Well, that's what you Maestros think, isn't it? You don't want to suffer, you just want the

glory. You lay your rod on the land, and the land bears fruit. That's

what you think. But it

doesn't work that way. It's your blood the land wants; it's your sacrifice. And as long as you

deny that, others are going to die in your place. Believe me, I'd cut my throat now if I

thought I could raise these people, but I've been played a wretched trick. I've the will to do

it, but my blood's not worth a damn. Yours is.' I don't know why. I wish it weren't. But it is."

"Would Uma Umagammagi like to see me bleed?" Gentle said. "Or Tishalulte? Or

Jokalaylau? Is that what your loving mothers want from this child?"

"You don't belong to them. I don't know who you belong to, but you didn't come from their

sweet bodies."

"I must have come from somewhere," Gentle said, voicing that thought for the first time in

his life. "I've got a purpose in me, and I think God put it there."

"Don't look too far, Maestro. Your ignorance may be the only defense the rest of us have

got against you. Give up your ambition now, before you find out what you're really capable

of."

"I can't."

"Oh, but it's easy," Athanasius said. "Kill yourself, Maestro. Let the land have your blood.

That's the greatest service you could do the Dominions now."

There was the bitterest echo, in these words, of a letter he'd read months ago, in another

kind of wilderness.

Do this for the women of the world, Vanessa had written. Slit your lying throat.

Had he really traveled the Dominions simply to have the advice he'd been given by a

woman whom he'd cheated in love returned to him? After all this striving for

comprehension, was he finally as injurious and fraudulent a Maestro as he was a lover?

Athanasius read the accuracy of this last dart off his target's face and with a feral grin

hammered it home.

"Do it soon, Maestro," he said. "There are enough orphans in the Dominions already,

without you indulging your ambitions for another day."

Gentle let these cruelties go. "You married me to the love of my life, Athanasius," he said. "I

won't ever forget that kindness."

"Poor Pie 'oh' pah," the other man replied, grinding the point home. "Another of your

victims. What a poison there must be in you, Maestro."

Gentle turned and left the circle without responding, with Athanasius repeating his earlier

advice to usher him on his way.

"Kill yourself soon, Maestro," he said. "For you, for Pie, for all of us. Kill yourself soon."

It took Gentle a quarter of an hour to make his way through the ravagement to open

ground, hoping as he went that he'd find some vehicle—Floccus', perhaps—that he could

commandeer for the return journey to Yzordderrex. If he found nothing, it would be a long

trek on foot, but that would have to be the way of it. What little illumination the fires behind

him proffered soon dwindled, and he was obliged to search by starlight, which would most

probably have failed to show him the vehicle had his path not been redirected by the squeals

of Floccus Dado's porcine pet Sighshy^ who, along with her litter, was still inside. The car

had been thrown over in the storm, and so he went to it simply to let the animals out,

planning to go on to find another. But as he struggled with the handle a human face

appeared at the steamed-up window. Floccus was inside and greeted Gentle's appearance

with a clamor of relief almost as high-pitched as Sighshy's. Gentle clambered up onto the

side of the car and after much swearing and sweating wrenched the door open with brute

force.

"Oh, you're a sight to behold, Maestro," Floccus said. "I thought I was going to suffocate in

there."

The stench was piercing, and it came with Floccus when he clambered out. His clothes

were caked in the litter's excrement, and Mama's too.

"How the hell did you get in there?" Gentle asked him.

Floccus wiped a turd trail off his spectacles and blinked at his savior through them.

“When Athanasius told me to summon you, I thought, Something's wrong here, Dado. You'd

better go while you can. I'd just got into the car when the storm started, and it was simply

turned over, with all of us inside. The windows are unbreakable, and the locks were jammed.

I couldn't get out.”

“You were lucky to be in there.”

“So I see,” Floccus observed, surveying the distant vista of destruction.

“ What happened

out here?”

“Something came out of the First, in pursuit of Pie 'oh' pah.”

“The Unbeheld did this?”

“So it would seem.”

“Unkind,” Floccus said softly, which was surely the understatement of the night.

Floccus lifted Sighshy and her litter—two of which had perished when their mother fell on

them—out of the vehicle; then he and Gentle set to the task of putting it back on four wheels.

It took some doing, but Floccus made up in strength what he lacked in height, and between

the two of them the job was done.

Gentle had made plain his intention to return to Yzordderrex but wasn't certain of

Floccus's intentions until the engine was running. Then he said, “Are you coming with me?”

“I should stay,” Floccus replied. There was a fretful pause. “But I’ve never been much good

with death.”

“You said the same thing about sex.”

“It’s true.”

“That doesn’t leave much, does it?”

“Would you prefer to go without me, Maestro?”

“Not at all. If you want to come, come. But let’s get going. I want to be in Yzordderrex b y

dawn.”

“Why, what happens at dawn?” Floccus said, a superstitious flutter in his voice.

“It’s a new day.”

“Should we be grateful for that?” the other man inquired, as though he sniffed some

profound wisdom in the Maestro’s reply but couldn’t quite grasp it.

“Indeed we should, Floccus, indeed we should. For the day, and for the chance.”

“What... er... what chance would that be exactly?”

“The chance to change the world.”

“Ah,” said Floccus. “Of course. To change the world. I’ll make that my prayer from now on.”

“We’ll compose it together, Floccus. We’ve got to invent everything from now on: who we

are, what we believe. There’s been too many old roads taken. Too many old dramas

repeated. We’ve got to find a new way by tomorrow.”

“A new way.”

“That's right. We'll make that our ambition, agreed? To be new men
by the time the comet
comes up.”

Floccus' doubt was visible, even by starlight. “That doesn't give us
very long,” he observed.

True enough, Gentle thought. In the Fifth, midsummer could not be
very far off, and though

he didn't yet comprehend the reasons, he knew the Reconciliation
could only be performed

on that day. There was a fine irony. Having frittered away lifetimes in
pursuit of sensation,

the span he had left in which to make good the error of that waste
could be measured in

terms of hours.

“There'll be time,” he said, hoping to answer Floccus' doubts, and
subdue his own, but

knowing in his heart of hearts that he was doing neither.

6 Jude was stirred from the torpor Quaisoir's narcotic bed had
induced in her not by

sound—she'd long since become accustomed to the anarchy that had
raged unabated

throughout the night—but by a sense of unease too vague to be
identified and too insistent

to be ignored. Something of consequence had happened in the
Dominion, and though her

wits were dulled by indulgence, she woke too agitated to return to the
comfort of a scented

pillow. Head throbbing, she heaved herself up out of the bed and went
in search of her

sister. Concupiscentia was at the door, with a sly smile on her face. Jude half remembered

the creature slipping into one of her drugged dreams, but the details were hazy, and the

foreboding she'd woken with was more important now than remembering the fantasies that

had gone before. She found Quaisoir in a darkened room, sitting beside the window.

“Did something wake you, sister?” Quaisoir asked her.

“I don't quite know what, but yes. Do you know what it was?”

“Something in the desert,” Quaisoir replied, turning her head towards the window, though

she lacked the eyes to see what lay outside. “Something momentous.”

“Is there any way of finding out what?”

Quaisoir took a deep breath. “No easy way.”

“But there is one?”

“Yes, there's a place beneath the Pivot Tower...”

Concupiscentia had followed Judith into the room, but now, at the mention of this place,

she made to withdraw. She was neither quiet nor fast enough, however. Quaisoir summoned

her back.

“Don't be afraid,” she told the creature. “We don't need you with us once we're inside. But

fetch a lamp, will you? And something to eat and drink. We may be there awhile.”

It was half a day and more since Jude and Quaisoir had taken refuge in the suite of

chambers, and in that time any last occupants of the palace had made their escape, doubtless

fearing the revolutionary zeal that would want the fortress cleansed of the Autarch's

excesses down to the last bureaucrat. Those bureaucrats had fled, but the zealots hadn't

appeared in their place. Though Jude had heard commotion in the courtyards as she'd dozed,

it had never come close. Either the fury that had moved the tide was exhausted, and the

insurgents were resting before they began their assault on the palace, or else their fervor

had lost its singular purpose altogether, and the commotion she'd heard was factions

battling with each other for the right to plunder, which conflicts had destroyed them all, left,

right, and center. Whatever, the consequence was the same: a palace built to house many

thousands of souls—servants, soldiers, pen pushers, cooks, stewards, messengers, torturers,

and majordomos—was deserted, and they went through it, Jude led by Concupiscentia's

lamp, Quaisoir led by Jude, like three tiny specks of life lost in a vast and dark machine. The

only sounds were their footsteps, and those that said machine made as it ran down: hot-

water pipes ticking as the furnaces that fed them guttered out; shutters beating themselves

to splinters in empty rooms; guard dogs barking on gnawed leashes, fearful their masters

would not come again. Nor would they. The furnaces would cool, the shutters break, and the

dogs, trained to bring death, would have it come to them in their turn.
The age of the

Autarch Sartori was over, and no new age had yet begun.

As they walked Jude asked for an explanation of the place to which
they were going, and by

way of reply Quaisoir offered first a history of the Pivot. Of all the
Autarch's devices to

subdue and rule the Reconciled Dominions, she said—subverting the
religions and

governments of his enemies; setting nation against nation—none
would have kept him in

power for more than a decade had he not possessed the genius to steal
and to set at the

center of his empire the greatest symbol of power in the Imajica. The
Pivot was

Hapexamendios' marker, and the fact that the Unbeheld had allowed
the architect of

Yzordderrex to even touch, much less move, his pylon was for many
proof that however

much they might despise the Autarch, he was touched by divinity and
could never be

toppled, What powers it had conferred on its possessor even she didn't
know.

“Sometimes,” she said, “when he was high on kreauchee, he'd talk
about the Pivot as

though he was married to it, and he was the wife. Even when we
made love he'd talk that

way. He'd say it was in him the way he was in me. He'd always deny it
afterwa rd, of course,

but it was in his mind always. It's in every man's mind.”

Jude doubted this, and said so.

“But they so want to be possessed,” Quaisoir replied. “They want some Holy Spirit inside

them. You listen to their prayers.”

“That's not something I hear very often.”

“You will when the smoke clears,” Quaisoir replied. “They'll be afraid, once they realize the

Autarch's gone. They may have hated him, but they'll hate his absence more.”

“If they're afraid they'll be dangerous,” Jude said, realizing as she spoke how well these

sentiments might have come from Clara Leash's mouth. “They won't be devout.”

Concupiscentia halted, before Quaisoir could take up her account afresh, and began to

murmur a little prayer of her own.

“Are we here?” Quaisoir asked.

The creature broke the rhythm of her entreaty to tell her mistress that they were. There

was nothing remarkable about the door in front of them, or the staircases that wound out of

sight to either side of it. All were monumental, and therefore commonplace. They'd passed

through dozens of portals like this as they'd made their way through the place's cooling

belly. But Concupiscentia was plainly in terror of it, or rather of what lay on the other side.

“Are we near the Pivot?” Jude said.

“The tower's directly above us,” Quaisoir replied.

“That's not where we're going?”

“No. The Pivot would probably kill us both. But there's a chamber below the tower, where

the messages the Pivot collects drain away. I've spied there often, though he never knew it.”

Jude let go of Quaisoir's arm and went to the door, keeping to herself the irritation she felt

at being denied the tower itself. She wanted to see this power, which had reputedly been

shaped and planted by God Himself. Quaisoir had talked of it as lethal, and perhaps it was,

but how was anyone to know until they'd tested themselves against it? Perhaps its

reputation was the Autarch's invention, his way of keeping its gifts for himself. Under its

aegis, he'd prospered, no doubt of that. What might others do, if they had its blessing

conferred upon them? Turn night to day?

She turned the handle and pushed open the door. Sour and chilly air issued from the

darkened space beyond. Jude summoned Concupiscentia to her side, took the lamp from the

creature, and held it high. Ahead lay a small inclined corridor, its walls almost burnished.

“Do I wait here, lady?” Concupiscentia asked.

“Give me whatever you brought to eat,” Quaisoir replied, “and stay outside the door. If you

hear or see anybody, I want you to come and find us. I know you don't like to go in there, but

you must be brave. Understand me, dearling?”

"I understand, lady," Concupiscentia replied, handing to her mistress the bundle and the

bottle she'd carried with her.

Thus laden, Quaisoir took Jude's arm and they stepped into the passage. One part of the

fortress's machine was still operational, it seemed, because as soon as they closed the door

after them a circuit, broken as long as the door stood wide, was completed, and the air began

to vibrate against their skin: vibrate and whisper.

"Here they are," Quaisoir said. "The intimations."

That was too civilized a word for this sound, Jude thought. The passageway was filled with

a quiet commotion, like snatches from a thousand radio stations, all incomprehensible,

coming and going as the dial was flipped, and flipped again. Jude raised the lamp to see how

much farther they had to travel. The passageway ended ten yards ahead, but with every yard

they covered the din increased—not in volume but in complexity—as new stations were

added to the number the walls were already tuned into. None of it was music. There were

multitudes of voices raised as a single sound, and there were solitary howls; there were

sobs, and shouts, and words spoken like a recitation.

"What is this noise?" Jude asked.

"The Pivot hears every piece of magic in the Dominions. Every invocation, every

confession, every dying oath. This is the Unbeheld's way of knowing

what Gods are being

worshiped besides Him. And what Goddesses, too.”

“He spies on deathbeds?” Jude said, more than faintly disgusted by the thought.

“On every place where a mortal thing speaks to the divine, whether the divinity exists or

not, whether the prayer's answered or not, He's there.”

“Here too?” Jude said.

“Not unless you start praying,” Quaisoir said.

“I won't.”

They were at the end of the passage, and the air was busier than ever; colder, too. The

lamp's light illuminated a room shaped like a colander, maybe twenty feet across, its curved

walls as polished as those of the passage. In the floor was a grille, like a gutter beneath a

butcher's table, through which the detritus of prayers, ripped from the hearts of those in

grief or washed up in tears of joy, ran off into the mountain upon which Yzordderrex was

built. It was difficult for Jude to grasp the notion of prayer as a solid thing—a kind of matter

to be gathered, analyzed, and sluiced away—but she knew her incomprehension was a

consequence of living in a world out of love with transformation. There was nothing so solid

that it couldn't be abstracted, nothing so ethereal that it couldn't find a place in the material

world. Prayer might be substance after a time, and thought (which she'd believed skull —

bound until the dream of the blue stone) fly like a bright-eyed bird,
seeing the world remote

from its sender; a flea might unravel flesh if wise to its code; and flesh
in its turn move

between worlds as a picture drawn in the mind of passage. All these
mysteries were, she

knew, part of a single system if she could only grasp it: one form
becoming another, and

another, and another, in a glorious tapestry of transformations, the
sum of which was Being

itself.

It was no accident that she embraced that possibility here. Though the
sounds that filled

the room were incomprehensible as yet, their purpose was known to
her, and it raised the

ambition of her thoughts. She let go of Quaisoir's arm and walked into
the middle of the

room, setting the lamp down beside the grille in the floor. They'd
come here for a specific

reason, and she knew she had to hold fast to that; otherwise her
thoughts would be carried

away on the swell of sound.

"How do we make sense of it?" she said to Quaisoir.

"It takes time," her sister replied. "Even for me. But I marked the
compass points on the

walls. Do you see?"

She did. Crude marks, scratched in the surface sheen.

"The Erasure is north-northwest of here. We can narrow the
possibilities a little by turning

in that direction.” She extended her arms, like a haunting spirit. “Will you lead me to the

middle?” she said.

Jude obliged, and they both turned in the direction of the Erasure. As far as Jude was

concerned, doing so did little good. The din continued in all its complexity. But Quaisoir

dropped her hands and listened intently, moving her head slightly from side to side as she

did so. Several minutes passed, Jude keeping her silence for fear an inquiry would break her

sister's concentration, and was rewarded for her diligence, finally, with some murmured

words.

“They're praying to the Madonna,” Quaisoir said.

“Who are?”

“Dearthers. Out at the Erasure. They're giving thanks for their deliverance and asking for

the souls of the dead to be received into paradise.”

She fell silent again for a time, and now, with some clue as to what she had to listen for,

Jude attempted to sort through the intimations that filled her head. But although she was

refining her focus, and could now snatch words and phrases out of the confusion, she

couldn't hold that focus long enough to make any sense of what she heard. After a time

Quaisoir's body relaxed, and she shrugged.

“There's just glimpses now,” she said. “I think they're finding bodies. I hear little sobs of

prayers and little oaths.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“This was some time ago,” Quaisoir said. “The Pivot's had these prayers for several hours.

But it was something calamitous, that's certain,” she said. “I think there are a lot of

casualties.”

“It's as if what happened in, Yzordderrex is spreading,” Jude said.

“Maybe it is,” Quaisoir said. “Do you want to sit down and eat?”

“In here?”

“Why not? I find it very soothing.” Reaching for Jude to help her, Quaisoir squatted down.

“You get used to it after a time. Maybe a little addicted. Speaking of which . . . where's the

food?” Jude put the bundle into Quaisoir's outstretched hands. “I hope the child packed

kreauchee.”

Her fingers were strong and, having scoured the surface of the bundle, dug deep, passing

the contents over to Jude one by one. There was fruit, there were three loaves of black

bread, there was some meat, and—the finding enough to bring a gleeful yelp from Quaisoir

small parcel which she did not pass over to Jude but put to her nose.

“Bright thing,” Quaisoir said. “She knows what I need.”

“Is it some kind of drug?” Jude said, laying down the food. “I don't want you taking it. I

need you here, not drifting off.”

“Are you trying to forbid me my pleasure, after the way you dreamed on my pillows?”

Quaisoir said. “Oh, yes, I heard your gasping and your groaning. Who were you imagining?”

“That's my business.”

“And this is mine,” Quaisoir replied, discarding the tissue in which Concupiscentia had

fastidiously wrapped the kreauchee. It looked appetizing, like a cube of fudge.

“When you've got no addiction of your own, sister, then you can moralize,” Quaisoir said. “I

won't listen, but you can moralize.”

With that, she put the whole of the kreauchee into her mouth, chewing on it contentedly.

Jude, meanwhile, sought more conventional sustenance, choosing among the various fruits

one that resembled a diminutive pineapple and peeling it to discover it was just that, its

juicy tart but its meat tasty. That eaten, she went on to the bread and slivers of meat, her

hunger so stimulated by the first few bites that she steadily devoured the lot, washing it

down with bitter water from the bottle. The fall of prayers that had seemed so insistent

when she'd first entered the chamber could not compete with the more immediate

sensations of fruit, bread, meat, and water; the din became a background burble which she

scarcely thought about until she'd finished her meal. By that time, the kreauchee was clearly

working in Quaisoir's system. She was swaying back and forth as though in the arms of some

invisible tide.

"Can you hear me?" Jude asked her.

She took awhile to reply. "Why don't you join me?" she said. "Kiss me, and we can share the

kreauchee. Mouth to mouth. Mind to mind."

"I don't want to kiss you."

"Why not? Do you hate yourself too much to make love?" She smiled to herself, amused by

the perverse logic of this. "Have you ever made love to a woman?"

"Not that I remember."

"I have. At the Bastion. It was better than being with a man."

She reached out towards Jude and found her hand with the accuracy of one sighted.

"You're cold," she said.

"No, you're hot," Jude replied, moving to break the contact.

"You know what air makes this place so cold, sister?" Quaisoir said.

"It's the pit beneath

the city, where the fake Redeemer went."

Jude looked down at the grille and shuddered. The dead were down there somewhere.

"You're cold like the dead are cold," Quaisoir went on. "Icy heart." All this she said in a

singsong voice, to the rhythm of her rocking. "Poor sister. To be dead already."

"I don't want to hear any more of .this," Jude said. She'd preserved her equanimity so far,

but Quaisoir's fugue talk was beginning to irritate her. "If you don't stop," she said quietly,

"I'm going to leave you here."

"Don't do that," Quaisoir replied. "I want you to stay and make love to me."

"I've told you—"

"Mouth to mouth. Mind to mind."

"You're talking in circles."

"That's the way the world was made," she said. "Joined together, round and round." She put

her hand to her mouth, as if to cover it, then smiled, with almost fiendish glee. "There's no

way in and there's no way out. That's what the Goddess says. When we make love, we go

round and round—"

She searched for Jude a second time, with the same unerring ease, and a second time Jude

withdrew her hand, realizing as she did so that this repetition was part of her sister's

egocentric game. A sealed system of mirrored flesh, moving round and round. Was that truly

how the world was made? If so, it sounded like a trap, and she wanted her mind out of it,

there and then.

"I can't stay in here," she said to Quaisoir.

"You'll come back?" her sister replied.

"Yes, in a while."

The answer was more repetition. "You'll come back."

This time Jude didn't bother replying, but crossed to the passageway and climbed back up

to the door. Concupis-centia was still waiting on the other side, asleep now, her form

delineated by the first signs of dawn through the window on the sill of which she rested. The

fact that day was breaking surprised Jude; she'd assumed that there were several hours yet

before the comet reared its burning head. She was obviously more disoriented than she'd

thought, the time she'd spent in the room with Quaisoir—listening to the prayers, eating,

and arguing—not minutes but hours. She went to the window and looked down at the dim

courtyards. Birds stirred on a ledge somewhere below her and rose suddenly, heading into

the brightening sky, taking her eye with them, up towards the tower. Quaisoir had been

unequivocal about the dangers of venturing there. But for all her talk of love between

women, wasn't she still in thrall to the mythologies of the man who'd made her Queen of

Yzordderrex, and therefore bound to believe that the places he kept her from would do her

harm? There was no better time to challenge that mythology than now, Jude thought, with a

new day beginning, and the power that had uprooted the Pivot and raised such walls around

it gone.

She went to the stairs and started to climb. After a few steps their

curve took her into utter

darkness, and she was obliged to ascend as blind as the sister she'd left below, her palm flat

against the cold wall. But after maybe thirty stairs her outstretched arm encountered a door,

so heavy she first assumed it to be locked. It required all her strength to open, but her effort

was well rewarded. On the other side was a passageway lighter than the staircase she'd

climbed, though still gloomy enough to limit her sight to less than ten yards. Hugging the

wall, she advanced with great caution, her route bringing her to the corner of a corridor, the

door that had once sealed it off from the chamber at its end blown from its hinges and lying,

fractured and twisted, on the tiled floor beyond. She paused here, in order to listen for any

sign of the wrecker's presence. There was none, so she moved on past the place, her gaze

drawn to a flight of stairs that led up to her left. Forsaking the passageway, she began a

second ascent, this one also leading into darkness, until she rounded a corner and a sliver of

light descended to meet her. Its source was the door at the summit of the stairs, which stood

slightly ajar.

Again, she halted a moment. Though there was no overt indication of power here—the

atmosphere was almost tranquil—she knew that the force she'd come to confront was

undoubtedly waiting in its silo at the top of the stairs, and more than

likely sentient. She

didn't discount the possibility that this hush was contrived to soothe her, and the light sent

to coax. But if it wanted her up there, it must have a reason. And if it didn't—if it was as

lifeless as the stone underfoot— she had nothing to lose.

“Let's see what you're made of,” she said aloud, the challenge delivered at least as much to

herself as the Unbeheld's Pivot. And so saying, she went to the door.

Though there were undoubtedly more direct routes to the Pivot Tower than the one he'd

taken with Nikaetomaas, Gentle decided to go the way he half remembered rather than

attempt a shortcut and find himself lost in the labyrinth. He parted company with Floccus

Dado, Sighshy, and litter at the Gate of Saints and began his climb through the palace,

checking on his position relative to the Pivot Tower from every window.

Dawn was in the offing. Birds rose singing from their nests beneath the colonnades and

swooped over the courtyards, indifferent to the bitter smoke that passed for mist this

morning. Another day was imminent, and his system was badly in need of sleep. He'd dozed

a little on the journey from the Erasure, but the effect had been cosmetic. There was a

fatigue in his marrow which would bring him to his knees very soon now, and the knowledge

of that made him eager to complete the day's business as quickly as possible. He'd come

back here for two reasons. First, to finish the task Pie's appearance and wounding had

diverted him from: the pursuit and execution of Sartori. Second, whether he found his

doppelganger here or not, to make his way back to the Fifth, where Sartori had talked of

founding his New Yzordderrex. It wouldn't be difficult to get home, he knew, now that he

was alive to his capacities as a Maestro. Even without the mystif to point the way, he'd be

able to dig from memory the means to pass between Dominions.

But first, Sartori. Though two days had passed since he'd let the Autarch slip, he nursed the

hope that his other would still be haunting his palace. After all, removal from this self-made

womb, where his smallest word had been law and his tiniest deed worshipful, would be

painful. He'd linger awhile, surely. And if he was going to linger anywhere, it would be close

to the object of power that had made him the undisputed master of the Reconciled

Dominions: the Pivot.

He was just beginning to curse himself for losing his way when he came upon the spot

where Pie had fallen. He recognized it instantly, as he did the distant door that led into the

tower. He allowed himself a moment of meditation at the spot where he'd cradled Pie, but it

wasn't their fond exchanges here that filled his head, it was the mystif's last words, uttered

in anguish as the force behind the Erasure claimed it.

Sartori, Pie had said. Find him... he knows....

Whatever knowledge Sartori possessed—and Gentle guessed it would concern plots laid

against the Reconciliation—he, Gentle, was ready to do whatever was required in order to

squeeze this information from his other before he delivered the coup de grace. There were

no moral niceties here. If he had to break every bone in Sartori's body, it would be a little

hurt set beside the crimes he'd committed as Autarch, and Gentle would perform such duties

gladly.

Thought of torture, and the pleasure he'd take in it, had tempted him from his meditation

entirely, and he gave up on his pursuit of equilibrium. Venom swilling in his belly, he headed

down the corridor, through the door, and into the tower. Though the comet was climbing

towards midmorning, very little of its light gained access to the tower, but those few beams

that did creep in showed him empty passageways in all directions. He still advanced with

caution; this was a maze of chambers, any one of which might conceal his enemy. Fatigue left

him less light-footed than he'd have liked, but he reached the stairs that curled up towards

the silo itself without his stumblings'attracting any attention, and began to climb. The door

at the top had been opened, he remembered, with the key of Sartori's thumb, and he'd have

to repeat the feat himself in order to enter.

That was no great challenge. They had the same thumbs, to the tiniest whorl.

As it was, he needed no feat. The door was open wide, and somebody was moving about

inside. Gentle halted ten steps from the threshold and drew breath. He'd need to

incapacitate his other quickly if he was to prevent retaliation: a pneuma to take off his right

hand, another for his left. Breath readied, he climbed swiftly to the top of the stairs and

stepped into the tower.

His enemy was standing beneath the Pivot, arms raised, reaching for the stone. He was all

in shadow, but Gentle caught the motion of his head as he turned towards the door, and

before the other could lower his arms in defense, Gentle had his fist to his mouth, the breath

rising in his throat. As it filled his palm his enemy spoke, but the voice when it came was not

his own, as he'd expected, but that of a woman. Realizing his error, he clamped his fist

around the pneuma to quench it, but the power he'd unleashed wasn't about to be cheated of

its quarry. It broke from between his fingers, its force fragmented but no less eager for that.

The pieces flew off around the silo, some darting up the sides of the Pivot, others entering

its shadow and extinguished there. The woman cried out in alarm and retreated from her

attacker, backing against the opposite wall. There the light found her

perfection. It was

Judith; or at least it seemed to be. He'd seen this face in Yzordderrex once already and been

mistaken.

"Gentle?" she said. "Is that you?"

It sounded like her too. But then hadn't that been his promise to Roxborough, that he'd

fashion a copy indistinguishable from the original?

"It's me," she said. "It's Jude."

Now he began to believe it was, for there was more proof in that last syllable than sight

could ever supply. Nobody in her circle of admirers, besides Gentle, had ever called her Jude.

Judy, sometimes; Juju, even; but never Jude. That was his diminution, and to his certain

knowledge she'd never suffered another to use it.

He repeated it now, his hand dropping from his mouth as he spoke, and seeing the smile

spread across his face she ventured back towards him, returning into the shadow of the

Pivot as he came to meet her. The move saved her life, Seconds after she left the wall a slab

of rock, blasted from the heights of the silo by the pneuma, fell on the spot where she'd

stood. It initiated a hard, lethal rain, shards of stone falling on all sides. There was safety in

the shelter of the Pivot, however, and there they met and kissed and embraced as though

they'd been parted a lifetime, not weeks, which in a sense was true. The din of falling rock

was muted in the shadow, though its thunder was only yards from where they stood. When

she cupped his face in her hands and spoke, her whispers were quite audible; as were his.

“I’ve missed you,” she said. There was a welcome warmth in her voice, after the days of

anguish and accusation he’d heard. “I even dreamed about you....”

“Tell me,” he murmured, his lips close to hers.

“Later, maybe,” she said, kissing him again. “I’ve so much to tell you,”

“Likewise,” Gentle said.

“We should find ourselves somewhere safer than this,” she said.

“We’re out of harm’s way here,” Gentle said.

“Yes, but for how long?”

The scale of the demolition was increasing, its violence out of all proportion to the force

Gentle had unleashed, as though the Pivot had taken the pneuma’s power and magnified it.

Perhaps it knew—how could it not? — that the man it had been in thrall to had gone and

was now about the business of shrugging off the prison Sartori had raised around it. Judging

by the size of the slabs falling all around, the process would not take long. They were

monumental, their impact sufficient to open cracks in the floor of the tower, the sight of

which brought a cry of alarm from Jude.

“Oh, God, Quaisoir!” she said.

“What about her?”

“She's down there!” Jude said, staring at the gaping ground. “There's a chamber below this!

She's in it!”

“She'll be out of there by now.”

“No, she's high on kreauchee! We have to get down there!”

She left Gentle's side and crossed to the edge of their shelter, but before she could make a

dash for the open door a new fall of rubble and dust obliterated the way ahead. It wasn't

simply blocks of the tower that were falling now, Gentle saw. There were vast shards of the

Pivot itself in this hail. What was it doing? Destroying itself, or shedding skins to uncover its

core? Whichever, their place in the shadow was more precarious by the second. The cracks

underfoot were already a foot wide and widening, the hovering monolith above them

shuddering as if it was about to give up the effort of suspension and drop. They had no

choice but to brave the rockfall.

He went to join Jude, searching his wits for a means to survival and picturing Chicka

Jackeen at the Erasure, his hands high to ward off the detritus dropped by the storm. Could

he do the same? Not giving himself pause to doubt, he lifted his hands above his head as he'd

seen the monk do, palms up, and stepped out of the Pivot's shadow. One heavenward glance

confirmed both the Pivot's shedding and the scale of his jeopardy. Though the dust was

thick, he could see that the monolith was sloughing off scales of stone, the pieces large

enough to smash them both to pulp. But his defense held. The slabs shattered two or three

feet above his naked head, their smithereens dropping like a fleeting vault around him. He

felt the impact nevertheless, as a succession of jolts through his wrists, arms, and shoulders,

and knew he lacked the strength to preserve the feat for more than a few seconds. Jude had

already grasped the method in his madness, however, and stepped from the shadow to join

him beneath this flimsy shield. There were perhaps ten paces between where they stood and

the safety of the door.

"Guide me," he told her, unwilling to take his eyes off the rain for fear his concentration

slip and the feat lose its potency.

Jude slipped her arm around his waist and navigated for them both, telling him where to

step to find clear ground and warning him when the path was so heavily strewn they were

obliged to stumble over stone. It was a tortuous business, and Gentle's upturned hands were

steadily beaten down until they were barely above his head, but the feat held to the door,

and they slid through it together, with the Pivot and its prison throwing down such a hail of

debris that neither was now visible.

Then Jude was off at speed, down the murky stairs. The walls were shaking, and laced with

cracks as the demolition above took its toll below, but they negotiated both the trembling

passageway and the second flight of stairs down to the lower level unharmed. Gentle was

startled at the sight and sound of Concupiscentia, who was screeching in the passageway

like a terrified ape, unwilling to go in search of her mistress, Jude had no such qualms. She'd

already thrown open the door and was heading down an incline into a lamp-lit chamber

beyond, calling Quaisoir's name to stir her from her stupor. Gentle followed, but was slowed

by the cacophony that greeted him, a mingling of manic whispers and the din of capitulation

from above. By the time he reached the room itself, Jude had bullied her sister to her feet.

There were substantial cracks in the ceiling and a constant drizzle of dust, but Quaisoir

seemed indifferent to the hazard.

"I said you'd come back," she said. "Didn't I? Didn't I say you'd come back? Do you want to

kiss me? Please kiss me, sister."

"What's she talking about?" Gentle asked.

The sound of his voice brought a cry from the woman. She flung herself out of Jude's arms.

"What have you done?" she yelled. "Why did you bring him here?"

"He's come to help us," Jude replied.

Quaisoir spat in Gentle's direction. "Leave me alone!" she screeched. "Haven't you done

enough? Now you want to take my sister from me! You bastard! I won't let you! We'll die

before you touch her!" She reached for Jude, sobbing in panic. "Sister! Sister."

"Don't be frightened," Jude said. "He's a friend." She looked at Gentle. "Reassure her," she

begged him. "Tell her who you are, so we can get out of here."

"I'm afraid she already knows," Gentle replied.

Jude was mouthing the word what? when Quaisoir's panic boiled up again.

"Sartori!" she screeched, her denunciation echoing around the room. "He's Sartori, sister!

Sartori!"

Gentle raised his hands in mock surrender, backing away from the woman. "I'm not going

to touch you," he said. "Tell her, Jude. I don't want to hurt her!"

But Quaisoir was in the throes of another outburst. "Stay with me, sister," she said,

grabbing hold of Jude. "He can't kill us both!"

"You can't stay in here," Jude said.

"I'm not going out!" Quaisoir said. "He's got soldiers out there! Rosengarten! That's who

he's got! And his torturers!"

"It's safer out there than it is in here," Jude said, casting her eyes up at the roof. Several

carbuncles had appeared in it, oozing debris. "We have to be quick!"

Still she refused, putting her hand up to Jude's face and stroking her cheek with her

clammy palm: short, nervy strokes.

"We'll stay here together," she said. "Mouth to mouth. Mind to mind."

"We can't," Jude told her, speaking as calmly as circumstance allowed.

"I don't want to be

buried alive, and neither do you."

"If we die, we die," said Quaisoir. "I don't want him touching me again, do you hear?"

"I know. I understand."

"Not ever! Not ever!"

"He won't," Jude said, laying her own hand over Quaisoir's, which was still stroking her

face. She laced her fingers through those of her sister and locked them. "He's gone," she said.

"He won't be coming near either of us again."

Gentle had indeed retreated as far as the passageway, but even though Jude waved him

away he refused to go any further. He'd had too many reunions cut short to risk letting her

out of his sight.

"Are you certain he's gone?"

"I'm certain."

"He could still be waiting outside for us."

"No, sister. He was afraid for his life. He's fled."

Quaisoir grinned at this. "He was afraid?" she said.

"Terrified,"

"Didn't I tell you? They're all the same. They talk like heroes, but there's piss in their

veins." She began to laugh out loud, as careless now as she'd been in terror moments before.

“We'll go back to my bedroom,” she said when the outburst subsided, “and sleep for a while.”

“Whatever you want to do,” Jude said. “But let's do it soon.”

Still chuckling to herself, Quaisoir allowed Jude to lift her up and escort her towards the

door. They had covered maybe half that distance, Gentle standing aside to let them pass,

when one of the carbuncles in the ceiling burst and threw down a rain of wreckage from the

tower above. Gentle saw Jude struck and felled by a chunk of stone; then the chamber filled

with an almost viscous dust that blotted out both sisters in an instant. With his only point of

reference the lamp, the flame of which was just visible through the dirt, he headed into the

fog to fetch her, as a thundering from above announced a further escalation of the tower's

collapse. There was no time for protective feits or for keeping his silence. If he failed to find

her in the next few seconds, they'd all be buried. He started to yell her name through the

rising roar and, hearing her call back to him, followed her voice to where she was lying, half

buried beneath a cairn of rubble.

“There's time,” he said to her as he began to dig. “There's time. We can make it out.”

With her arms unpinned she began to speed her own excavation, hauling herself up out of

the debris and locking her arms around Gentle's neck. He started to stand, pulling her free of

the remaining rocks, but as he did so another commotion began,
louder than anything that

had preceded it. This was not the din of destruction but a shriek of
white fury. The dust

above their heads parted, and Quaisoir appeared, floating inches from
the fissured ceiling.

Jude had seen this transformation before—ribbons of flesh unfurled
from her sister's back

and bearing her up—but Gentle had not. He gaped at the apparition,
distracted from

thoughts of escape.

'She's mine!' Quaisoir yelled, swooping towards them with the same
sightless but unerring

accuracy she'd possessed in more intimate moments, her arms
outstretched, her fingers

ready to twist the abductor's head from his neck.

But Jude was quick. She stepped in front of Gentle, calling Quaisoir's
name. The woman's

swoop faltered, the hungry hands inches from her sister's upturned
face.

"I don't belong to you!" she yelled back at Quaisoir. "I don't belong to
anybody! Hear me?"

Quaisoir threw back her head and loosed a howl of rage at this. It was
her undoing. The

ceiling shuddered and abandoned its duty at her din, collapsing
beneath the weight of nibble

heaped behind it. There was, Jude thought, time for Quaisoir to
escape the consequences of

her cry. She'd seen the woman move like lightning at Pale Hill, when
she had the will to do

so. But that will had gone. Face to the killing dirt, she let the debris

rain upon her, inviting it

with her unbroken cry, which didn't become alarm or plea, but remained a solid howl of fury

until the rocks broke and buried her. It wasn't quick. She went on calling down destruction

as Gentle took Jude's hand and hauled her away from the spot. He'd lost all sense of

direction in the chaos, and had it not been for the screeching of Concupiscentia in the

passageway beyond they'd never have made it to the door.

But make it they did, emerging with half their senses deadened by dust. Quaisoir's death

cry had ceased by now, but the roar behind them was louder than ever and drove them from

the door as the canker spread across the roof of the corridor. They outran it, however,

Concupiscentia giving up her keening when she knew her mistress was lost and overtaking

them, fleeing to some sanctuary where she could raise a song of lamentation.

Jude and Gentle ran until they were out from under any stone, roof, arch, or vault that

might collapse upon them, into a courtyard full of bees feasting on bushes that had chosen

that day, of all days, to blossom. Only then did they put their arms around each other again,

each sobbing for private griefs and gratitudes, while the ground shook under them to the din

of the demolition they'd escaped.

In fact the ground didn't stop reverberating until they were well

outside the walls of the

palace and wandering in the ruins of Yzordderrex. At Jude's suggestion they made their way

back at all speed to Peccable's house, where, she explained to Gentle, there was a well-used

route between this Dominion and the Fifth. He put up no resistance to this. Though he hadn't

exhausted Sartori's hiding places by any means (could he ever, when the palace was so

vast?) he had exhausted his limbs, his wits, and his will. If his other was still here in

Yzordderrex, he posed very little threat. It was the Fifth that needed to be defended against

him: the Fifth, which had forgotten magic and could so easily be his victim.

Though the streets of many Kesparates were little more than bloody valleys between

rubble mountains, there were sufficient landmarks for Jude to trace her way back towards

the district where Peccable's house had stood. There was no certainty, of course, that it

would still be standing after a day and a night of cataclysm, but if they had to dig to reach

the cellar, so be it.

They were silent for the first mile or so of the trek, but then they began to talk, beginning —

inevitably—with an explanation from Gentle as to why Quaisoir, hearing his voice, had taken

him for her husband. He prefaced his account with the caveat that he wouldn't mire it in

apology or justification but would tell it simply, like some grim fable. Then he went on to do

precisely that. But the telling, for all its clarity, contained one significant distortion. When he

described his encounter with the Autarch he drew in Jude's mind the portrait of a man to

whom he bore only a rudimentary resemblance, a man so steeped in evil that his flesh had

been corrupted by his crimes. She didn't question this description, but pictured an

individual whose inhumanity seeped from every pore, a monster whose very presence

would have induced nausea.

Once he'd unraveled the story of his doubling, she began to supply details of her own.

Some were culled from dreams, some from clues she'd had from Quaisoir, yet others from

Oscar Godolphin. His entrance into the account brought with it a fresh cycle of revelations.

She started to tell Gentle about her romance with Oscar, which in turn led on to the subject

of Dowd, living and dying; thence to Clara Leash and the Tabula Rasa.

"They're going to make it very dangerous for you back in London," she told him, having

related what little she knew about the purges they'd undertaken in the name of

Roxborough's edicts. "They won't have the slightest compunction about murdering you, once

they know who you are."

"Let them try," Gentle said flatly. "Whatever they want to throw at me, I'm ready. I've got

work to do, and they're not going to stop me.”

“Where will you start?”

“In CJerkenwell. I had a house in Gamut Street. Pie says it's still standing. My life's there,

ready for the remembering. We both need the past back, Jude.”

“Where do I get mine from?” she wondered aloud.

“From me and from Godolphin.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I'd like a less partial source. I've lost Clara, and now Quaisoir. I'll

have to start looking.” She thought of Celestine as she spoke, lying in darkness beneath the

Tabula Rasa's tower.

“Have you got somebody in mind?” Gentle asked.

“Maybe,” she said, as reluctant as ever to share that secret.

He caught the whiff of evasion. “I'm going to need help, Jude,” he said. “I hope, whatever's

been between us in the past—good and bad—we can find some way to work together that'll

benefit us both.”

A welcome sentiment, but not one she was willing to open her heart for. She simply said,

“Let's hope so,” and left it at that.

He didn't press the issue, but turned the conversation to lighter matters. “What was the

dream you had?” he asked her. She looked confounded for a moment. “You said you had a

dream about me, remember?”

“Oh, yes,” she replied. “It was nothing, really. Past history.”

When they reached Peccable's house it was still intact, though several others in the street

had been reduced to blackened rubble by missiles or arsonists. The door stood open, and the

interior had been comprehensively looted, down to the tulips and the vase on the dining

room table. There was no sign of bloodshed, however, except those scabby stains Dowd had

left when he'd first arrived, so she presumed that Hoi-Polloi and her father had escaped

unharmd. The signs of frantic thieving did not extend to the cellar. Here, though the shelves

had been cleared of the icons, talismans, and idols, the removal had been made calmly and

systematically. There was not a rosary remaining, or any sign that the thieves had broken a

single charm. The only relic of the cellar's life as a trove was set in the floor the ring of

stones that echoed that of the Retreat.

"This is where we arrived," Jude said.

Gentle stared down at the design in the floor. "What is it?" he said. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know. Does it matter? As long as it gets us back to the Fifth—"

"We've got to be careful from now on," Gentle replied. "Everything's connected. It's all one

system. Until we understand our place in the pecking order, we're vulnerable."

One system; she'd speculated on that possibility in the room beneath the tower: the

Imajica as a single, infinitely elaborate pattern of transformation. But just as there were

times for such musings, so there were also times for action, and she had no patience with

Gentle's anxieties now.

"If you know another way out of here," she said, "let's take it. But this is the only way I

know. Godolphin used it for years and it never harmed him, till Dowd screwed it up."

Gentle had gone down on his haunches and was laying his fingers on the stones that bound

the mosaic.

"Circles are so powerful," he said.

"Are we going to use it or not?" .

He shrugged. "I don't have a better way," he said, still reluctant. "Do we just step inside?"

"That's all."

He rose. She laid her hand on his shoulder, and he reached up to clasp it.

"We have to hold tight," she said. "I only got a glimpse of the In Ovo, but I wouldn't want to

get lost there."

"We won't get lost," he said, and stepped into the circle.

She was with him a heartbeat later, and already the Express was getting up steam. The

solid cellar walls and empty shelves began to blur. The forms of their translated selves

began to move in their flesh.

The sensation of passage awoke in Gentle memories of the outward

journey, when Pie 'oh'

pah had stood beside him where Jude was now. Remembering, he felt
a stab of inconsolable

loss. There were so many people he'd encountered in these Dominions
whom he'd never set

eyes on again. Some, like Efreet Splendid and his mother,
Nikaetomaas, and Huzzah, because

they were dead. Others, like Athanasius, because the crimes Sartori
had committed were his

crimes now, and whatever good he hoped to do in the future would
never be enough to

expunge them. The hurt of these losses was of course negligible beside
the greater grief he'd

sustained at the Erasure, but he'd not dared dwell too much upon that,
for fear it

incapacitated him. Now, however, he thought of it, and the tears
started to flow, washing the

last glimpse of Peccable's cellar away before the mosaic had removed
the travelers from it.

Paradoxically, had he been leaving alone the despair might not have
cut so deep. But as Pie

had been fond of saying, there was only ever room for three players in
any drama, and the

woman in the flux beside him, her glyph burning through his tears,
would from this moment

on remind him that he had departed Yzordderrex with one of those
three left behind.

One hundred and fifty-seven days after beginning his journey across
the Reconciled

Dominions, Gentle once again set foot on the soil of England. Though
it wasn't yet the middle

of June, spring had arrived prematurely, and the season on its heels
was at its height.

Flowers not due to blossom for another month were already blowsy
and heavy-headed with

seeds; bird and insect life abounded, as species that normally
appeared months apart

flourished simultaneously. This summer's dawns were announced not
with choruses but

with full-throated choirs; by midday the skies from 'coast to coast
were cloudy with feeding

millions, the wheels slowing through the afternoon, until by dusk the
din had become a

music (sated and survivors alike giving thanks for the day) so rich it
lulled even the crazy

into remedial sleep. If a Reconciliation could indeed be planned and
achieved in the little

time before midsummer, then it would be burgeoning country that the
rest of the Imajica

would greet: an England of bountiful harvests, spread beneath a
melodious heaven.

It was full of music now, as Gentle wandered from the Retreat out
across the dappled grass

to the perimeter of the copse. The parkland was familiar to him,
though its lovingly tended

arbors were jungles now, and its lawns were veldt.

“This is Joshua's place, isn't it?” he said to Jude. “Which way's the house?”

She pointed across a wilderness of gilded grass. The roof of the mansion was barely visible

above the surf of fronds and butterflies.

“The very first time I saw you was in that house,” he told her, “I remember... Joshua called

you down the stairs. He had a pet name you despised. Peachblossom, was it? Something like

that. As soon as I set eyes on you—”

“It wasn't me,” Jude said, halting this romantic reverie. “It was Quaisoir.”

“Whatever she was then, you are now.”

“I doubt that. It was a long time ago, Gentle. The house is in ruins, and there's only one

Godolphin left. History isn't going to repeat itself. I don't want it to. I don't want to be

anybody's object.”

He acknowledged the warning in these words with an almost formal statement of intent.

“Whatever I did that caused you or anybody else harm,” he said, “I want to make good.

Whether I did it because I was in love, or because I was a Maestro and I thought I was above

common decency. . . . I'm here to heal the hurt. I want Reconciliation, Jude. Between us.

Between the Dominions. Between the living and the dead if I can do it.”

“That's a hell of an ambition,”

“The way I see it, I’ve been given a second chance. Most people don’t get that.”

His plain sincerity mellowed her. “Do you want to wander to the house, for old time’s

sake?” she asked him.

“Not unless you do.”

“No, thanks. I had my little fit of déjà vu when I convinced Charlie to bring me here.”

Gentle had of course told her about his encounter with Estabrook in the Dearthers’ tents

and about the man’s subsequent demise. She’d been unmoved.

“He was a difficult old bugger, you know,” she now remarked. “I must have known in my

gut he was a Godolphin, or I’d never have put up with his damn fool games.”

“I think he was changed by the end,” Gentle said. “Maybe you’d have liked him a little

more.”

“You’ve changed too,” she said, as they started to wander towards the gate. “People are

going to be asking a lot of questions, Gentle. Like: Where have you been and what have you

been doing?”

“Why does anybody even have to know I’m back?” he said. “I never meant that much to any

of them, except Taylor, and he’s gone.”

“Clem, too,”

“Maybe.”

“It’s your choice,” she said. “But when you’ve got so many enemies,

you may need some of

your friends.”

“I’d prefer to stay invisible,” he told her. “That way nobody sees me, enemies or friends.”

As the bounding wall came in sight the skies changed with almost eerie haste, the few

fluffy clouds that minutes before had been drifting in the blue now congregating into a

lowering bank that first shed a light drizzle and a minute later was bursting like a dam. The

downpour had its advantages, however, sluicing from their clothes, hair, and skin all trace of

Yzordderrexian dust. By the time they’d clambered through the mesh of timbers and

convolvulus around the gate and trudged along the muddied road to the village — there to

take shelter in the post office—they could have passed for two tourists (one with a

somewhat bizarre taste in hiking clothes) who’d strayed too far from the beaten track and

needed help to find their way home.

Though neither of them had any valid currency in their pockets, Jude was quick to

persuade one of two lads who stopped in the post office to drive them back into London,

promising a healthy fee at the other end if he did so. The storm worsened as they traveled,

but Gentle rolled down the window in the back and stared at the passing panorama of an

England he hadn’t seen for half a year, content to let the rain soak him all over again.

Jude was meanwhile left to endure a monologue from their driver. He had a mutinous

palate; which rendered every third word virtually unintelligible, but the gist of his chatter

was plain enough. It was the opinion of every weather watcher he knew, he said, and these

were folk who lived by the land and had ways of predicting floods and droughts no fancy -

talking meteorologist ever had, that the country was in for a disastrous summer.

“We'll either be cooked or drowned,” he said, prophesying months of monsoons and

heatwaves.

She'd heard talk like this before,, of course; the weather was an English obsession. But

having come from the ruins of Yzordderrex, with the burning eye of the comet overhead and

the air stinking of death, the youth's casually apocalyptic chatter disturbed her. It was as if

he was willing some cataclysm to overtake his little world, not comprehending for a moment

what that implied.

When he grew bored with predicting ruination, he started to ask her questions about

where she and her friend had been coming from or going to when the storm had caught

them. She saw no reason not to tell him they'd been at the estate, so she did so. Her reply

earned her what studied disinterest had failed to achieve for three quarters of an hour: his

silence. He gave her a baleful look in the mirror and then turned on the radio, proving, if

nothing else, that the shadow of the Godolphin family was sufficient to hush even a

doomsayer. They traveled to the outskirts of London without further exchange, the youth

only breaking the silence when he needed directions.

"Do you want to be dropped at the studio?" she asked Gentle.

He was slow to answer, but when he did it was to reply that, yes, that's where he wanted to

go. Jude furnished instructions to the driver and then turned her gaze back towards Gentle.

He was still staring out the window, rain speckling his brow and cheeks like sweat, drops

hanging off his nose, chin, and eyelashes. The smallest of smiles curled the corners of his

mouth. Catching him unawares like this, she almost regretted her dismissal of his overtures

at the estate. This face, for all that the mind behind it had done, was the face that had

appeared to her while she slept in Quaisoir's bed: the dream lover whose imagined caresses

had brought from her cries so loud her sister had heard them two rooms away. Certainly,

they could never again be the lovers who'd courted in the great house two centuries before.

But their shared history marked them in ways they had yet to discover, and perhaps when

those discoveries were all made they'd find a way to put into flesh the deeds she dreamed in

Quaisoir's bed.

The rainstorm had preceded them to the city, unleashed its torrent, and moved off, so that

by the time they reached the outskirts there was sufficient blue sky overhead to promise a

warm, if glistening, evening. The traffic was still clogged, however, and the last three miles

of the journey took almost as long as the previous thirty. By the time they reached Gentle's

studio their driver, used to the quiet roads around the estate, was out of sympathy with the

whole endeavor and had several times broken his silence to curse the traffic and warn his

passengers that he was going to require very considerable recompense for his troubles.

Jude got out of the car along with Gentle and on the studio step—out of the driver's

earshot—asked him if he had enough money inside to pay the man. She would rather take a

taxi from here, she said, than endure his company any longer. Gentle replied that if there

was any cash in the studio, it certainly wouldn't be sufficient.

"It looks like I'm stuck with him then," Jude said. "Never mind. Do you want me to come up

with you? Have you got a key?"

"There'll be somebody in downstairs," he replied. "They've got a spare."

"Then I suppose this is it." It was so bathetic, parting like this after all that had gone

before. "I'll ring you when we've both slept"

"The phone's probably been cut off."

“Then ring me from a box, huh? I won't be at Oscar's, I'll be at home.”

The conversation might have guttered out there, but for his reply.

“Don't stay away from him on my account,” he said.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Just that you've got your love affairs,” he said.

“And what? You've got yours?”

“Not exactly.”

“What then?”

“I mean, not exactly love affairs.” He shook his head. “Never mind. We'll talk about it some

other time.”

“No,” Jude told him, taking his arm as he tried to turn from her.

“We'll talk about it now.”

Gentle sighed wearily. “Look, it doesn't matter,” he said.

“If it doesn't matter, just tell me.”

He hesitated for several seconds. Then he said, “I got married.”

“Did you indeed?” she said, with feigned lightness. “And who's the lucky girl? Not the kid

you were talking about?”

“Huzzah? Good God, no.”

He paused for a tiny time, frowning deeply.

“Go on,” she said. “Spit it out.”

“I married Pie 'oh' pah.”

Her first impulse was to laugh—the thought was absurd—but before the sound escaped

her she caught the frown on his face and revulsion overtook laughter. This was no joke. He'd

married the assassin, the sexless thing who was a function of its lover's every desire. And

why was she so stunned? When Oscar had described the species to her, hadn't she herself

remarked that it was Gentle's idea of paradise?

"That's some secret," she said.

"I would have told you about it sooner or later."

Now she allowed herself a little laughter, soft and sour. "Back there you almost had me

believing there was something between us."

"That's because there was," he replied. "Because there always will be."

"Why should that matter to you now?"

"I have to hold on to a little of what I was. What I dreamed."

"And what did you dream?"

"That the three of us—" He stopped, sighing. Then: "That the three of us would find some

way to be together." He wasn't looking at her but at the empty ground between them, where

he'd clearly wanted his beloved Pie to stand. "The mystif would have learned to love you," he

said.

"I don't want to hear this," she snapped.

"It would have been anything you desired. Anything."

"Stop," she told him. "Just stop."

He shrugged. "It's all right," he said. "Pie's dead. And we're going our different ways. It was

just some stupid dream I had. I thought you'd want to know it, that's all."

"I don't want anything from you," she replied coldly. "You can keep your lunacies to

yourself from now on!"

She'd long since let go of his arm, leaving him to retreat up the steps. But he didn't go. He

simply stood watching her, squinting like a drunkard trying to hook one thought to another.

It was she who retreated, shaking her head as she turned her back on him and crossed the

puddled pavement to the car. Once in, the door slammed, she told the driver to get going,

and— the car sped from the curb.

On the step Gentle watched the corner where the car turned long after the vehicle had

gone from sight, as though some words of peace might yet come to his lips and be carried

from them to call her back. But he was out of persuasions. Though he'd returned to his place

as a Reconciler, he knew he'd here opened a wound he lacked the gift to heal, at least until

he'd slept and recovered his faculties.

Forty-five minutes after she'd left Gentle on his doorstep, Jude was throwing open the

windows of her house to let in the late-afternoon sun and some fresh air. The journey from

the studio had passed with her scarcely being aware of the fact, so stunned had she been by

Gentle's revelation. Married! The thought was absurd, except that she couldn't find it in

herself to be amused.

Though it was now many weeks since she'd occupied the house (all but the hardiest of her

plants had died from loneliness, and she'd forgotten how the percolator and the locks on the

windows worked), it was still a place she felt at home in, and by the time she'd downed a

couple of cups of coffee, showered, and changed into some clean clothes, the Dominion from

which she'd stepped only hours before was receding. In the presence of so many familiar

sights and smells the strangeness of Yzordderrex wasn't its strength but its frailty. Without

invitation, her mind had already drawn a line between the place she'd left and the one which

she was now in, as solid as the division between a thing dreamt and a thing lived. No wonder

Oscar had made a ritual of going up to his treasure room, she thought, and communing with

his collection. It was a way of holding on to a perception that was under constant siege by

the commonplace.

With several jolts of coffee buzzing around her bloodstream, the fatigue she'd felt on the

journey back into the city had disappeared, so she decided to use the evening to visit Oscar's

house. She'd called him several times since she'd got back, but the fact that nobody had

answered was not, she knew, proof of his absence or demise. He'd seldom picked up the

telephone in the house—that duty had fallen to Dowd—and more than once he'd stated his

abhorrence of the machines. In paradise, he'd once said, the common blessed use telegrams

and the saints have talking doves; all the telephones are down below.

She left the house at seven or so, caught a cab, and went to Regent's Park Road. She found

the house securely 'locked, without so much as a window standing ajar, which on such a

clement evening surely meant there was nobody home. Just to be sure, she went around to

the rear of the house and peered in. At the sight of her, the three parrots Oscar kept in the

back room rose from their perches in alarm. Nor did they settle, but squawked on in panic as

she cupped her hands over her brow and peered in to see if their seed and water bowls were

full. Though their perches were too far from the window for her to see, their level of

agitation was enough to make her fear the worst Oscar, she suspected, hadn't soothed their

feathers in a long time. So where was he? Back at the estate, lying dead in the long grass? If

so, it would be folly to go back there now and look for him, with darkness an hour away at

most. Besides, when she thought back to her last glimpse of him, she was reasonably certain

she'd seen him rising to his feet, framed against the door. He was robust, despite his

excesses. She couldn't believe he was dead. In hiding, more like: concealing himself from the

Tabula Rasa. With that thought in mind she returned to the front door and scribbled an

anonymous note, telling him she was alive and well, and slipped it into the letter box. He'd

know who'd penned it. Who else would write that the Express had brought her home, safe

and sound?

A little after ten-thirty she was preparing for bed when she heard somebody calling her

name from the street. She went to the balcony and looked out to see Clem standing on the

pavement below, hollering for all he was worth. It was many months since they'd spoken,

and her pleasure at the sight of him was tinged with guilt at her neglect. But from the relief

in his voice at her appearance, and the fervor of his hug, she knew he hadn't come to

squeeze apologies out of her. He needed to tell her something extraordinary, he said, but

before he did (she'd think he was crazy, he warned), he needed a drink. Could she get him a

brandy?

She could and did.

He fairly guzzled it, then said, "Where's Gentle?"

The question, and his demanding tone, caught her off guard, and she floundered. Gentle

wanted to be invisible, and furious as she was with him, she felt obliged to respect that wish.

But Clem needed to know badly.

"He's been away, hasn't he? Klein told me he tried calling, but the

phone was cut off. Then

he wrote Gentle a letter, and it was never answered—”

“Yes,” Jude said. “I believe he's been away.”

“But he just came back.”

“Did he?” she replied, more puzzled by the moment. “Maybe you know better than I do.”

“Not me,” he said, pouring himself another brandy. “Taylor.”

“Taylor? What are you talking about?”

Clem downed the liquor. “You're going to say I'm crazy, but hear me out, will you?”

“I'm listening.”

“I haven't been sentimental about losing him. I haven't sat at home reading his love letters

and listening to the songs we danced to. I've tried to get out and be useful for a change. But I

have left his room the way it was. I couldn't bring myself to go through his clothes or even

strip the bed. I kept putting it off. And the more I didn't do it, the more impossible it seemed

to be. Then tonight, I came in just after eight, and I heard somebody talking.”

Every particle of Clem's body but his lips was still as he spoke, transfixed by the memory.

“I thought I'd left the radio on, but no, no, I realized it was coming from upstairs, from his

bedroom. It was him, Judy, talking clear as day, calling me up the way he used to. I was so

afraid I almost fled. Stupid, isn't it? There I was, praying and praying

for some sign he was in

God's hands, and as soon as it came I practically shat myself. I tell you, I was half an hour on

the stairs, hoping he'd stop calling me. And sometimes he did for a while, and I'd half

convince myself I'd imagined it. Then he'd start again. Nothing melodramatic. Just him trying

to persuade me not to be afraid and come up and say hello. So, eventually, that's what I did.”

His eyes were filling with tears, but there was no grief in his voice.

“He liked that room in the evening. The sun fills it up. That's what it was like tonight: full

of sun. And he was there, in the light. I couldn't see him but I knew he was next to me

because he said so. He told me I looked well. Then he said, 'It's a glad day, Clem. Gentle came

back, and he's got the answers.' ”

“What answers?” Jude said.

“That's what I asked him. I said, 'What answers, Tay?' But you know Tay when he's happy.

He gets delirious, like a child.” Clem spoke with a smile, his gaze on sights remembered from

better days. “He was so full of the fact that Gentle was back, I couldn't get much more from

him.”

Clem looked up at Jude.

“The light was going,” he said. “And I think he wanted to go with it. He said that it was our

duty to help Gentle. That was why he was showing himself to me this way. It wasn't easy, he

said. But then neither was being a guardian angel. And I said, Why only one? One angel when

there's two of us? And he said, Because we are one, Clem, you and I. We always we re, and we

always will be. Those were his exact words, I swear. Then he went away. And you know what

I kept thinking?"

"What?"

"That I wished I hadn't waited on the stairs and wasted all that time I could have had with

him," Clem set down his glass, pulled a tissue from his pocket, and blew his nose. "That's all,"

he said.

"I think that's plenty."

"I know what you're thinking," he said with a little laugh. "You're thinking, Poor Clem. He

couldn't grieve so he's having hallucinations."

"No," she said, very softly. "I'm thinking, Gentle doesn't know how lucky he is, having

angels like you two."

"Don't humor me."

"I'm not," she said. "I believe everything you've just told me happened."

"You do?"

"Yes."

Again, a laugh. "Why?"

"Because Gentle came home tonight, Clem, and I was the only one who knew it."

He left ten minutes later, apparently content to know that even if he was crazy there was

another lunatic in his circle he could turn to when he wanted to share his insanities. Jude

told him as much as she felt able at this juncture, which was very little, but she promised to

contact Gentle on Clem's behalf and tell him about Taylor's visitation. Clem wasn't so

grateful that he was blinded to her discretion.

"You know a lot more than you're telling me, don't you?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "But maybe in a little while I'll be able to tell you more."

"Is Gentle in danger?" Clem asked. "Can you tell me that at least?"

"We all are," she said. "You. Me. Gentle. Taylor."

"Taylor's dead," Clem said. "He's in the light. Nothing can hurt him."

"I hope you're right," she said grimly. "But please, Clem, if he finds you again —"

"He will."

"—then when he does, tell him nobody's safe. Just because Gentle's back in the —back

home doesn't mean the troubles are over. In fact, they're just beginning."

"Tay says something sublime's going to happen. That's his word: sublime."

"And maybe it will. But there's a lot of room for error. And if anything goes wrong—" She

halted, her head filled with memories of the In Ovo and the ruins of Yzordderrex.

“Well, whenever you feel you can tell me,” Clem said, “we’ll be ready to hear. Both of us.”

He glanced at his watch. “I should be out of here. I’m late.”

“Party?”

“No, I’m working with a hospice for the homeless. We’re out most nights, trying to get kids

off the streets. The city’s full of them.” She took him to the door, but before he stepped out

he said, “You remember our pagan party at Christmas?”

She grinned. “Of course. That was quite a shindig.”

“Tay got stinking drunk after everybody had gone. He knew he wasn’t going to be seeing

most of them again. Then of course he got sick in the middle of the night, so we stayed up

together talking about—oh, I don’t know, everything under the sun. And he told me how

much he’d always loved Gentle. How Gentle was the mystery man in his life. He’d been

dreaming about him, he said: speaking in tongues.”

“He told me the same thing,” Jude said.

“Then, out of the blue, he said that next year I should have the Nativity back, and go to

Midnight Mass the way we used to, and I told him I thought we’d decided none of that made

much sense. And you know what he said to me? He said light was light, whatever name you

call it, and it was better to think of it coming in a face you knew.” Clem smiled. “I thought he

was talking about Christ. But now ... now I’m not so sure.”

She hugged him hard, pressing her lips against his flushed cheek.
Though she suspected

that there was truth in what he said, she couldn't bring herself to
voice the possibility. Not

knowing that the same face Tay had imagined as that of the returning
sun was also the face

of the darkness that might soon eclipse them all.

Though the bed Gentle had collapsed into the night before had been stale, and the pillow

beneath his head damp, he couldn't have slept more soundly had he been rocked in the arms

of Mother Earth Herself. When he woke, fifteen hours later, it was to a fine June morning,

and the dreamless time behind him had put new strength into his sinews. There was no gas,

electricity, or hot water, so he was obliged to shower and shave in cold water, which was

respectively a bracing and a bloody experience. That done, he took some time to assess the

state of the studio. It had not remained entirely untouched in his absence. At some juncture

either an old girlfriend or a very particular thief had come in—he'd left two of the windows

open, so gaining access had presented no difficulty—and the interloper had stolen both

clothes and more private bric-a-brac. It was such a long time since he'd been here, however,

that he couldn't remember precisely what was missing: some letters and postcards from the

mantelpiece, a few photographs (though he'd not liked to be recorded this way, for what

were now obvious reasons), and a few items of jewelry (a gold chain; two rings; a crucifix).

The theft didn't much bother him. He'd never been a sentimentalist or a hoarder. Objects

were like glossy magazines: fetching for a day, then readily discarded.

There were other, more disgusting, signs of his absence in the bathroom, where clothes

he'd left to dry before his departure had grown green fur, and in the refrigerator, the shelves

of which were scattered with what looked like pupating zarzi, stinking of putrefaction.

Before he could really begin to clean up he had to have some power in the house, and to get

it would require some politicking. He'd had the gas, telephone, and electricity cut off in the

past, when, in the lean times between forgeries and sugar mamas, he'd run out of funds. But

he had the patter to get them turned back on again well honed, and that had to be the

priority of the hour.

He dressed in the freshest of his clothes and went downstairs to present himself to the

venerable but dotty Mrs. Erskine, who occupied the ground-floor flat. It was she who'd let

him in the day before, remarking with her characteristic candor that he looked as though

he'd been kicked half to death, to which he'd replied that he felt the same way. She didn't

question his absence, which was not surprising given that his occupation of the studio had

always been sporadic, but she did ask him if he was going to be staying awhile this time. He

said he thought so, and she replied that she was pleased at this, because during these

summer days people always got crazy, and since Mr. Erskine's death

she was sometimes

frightened.

She made tea while he availed himself of her telephone, calling around the services he'd

lost. It turned out to be a frustrating business. He'd lost the knack of charming the women he

spoke to into some action on his behalf. Instead of an exchange of flatteries he was served a

chilly salad of officiousness and condescension. He had unpaid bills, he was told, and his

supplies would not be reconnected until payment was forthcoming. He ate some toast Mrs.

Erskine had made, drank several cups of tea, then went down into the basement and left a

note for the caretaker that he was now back in residence and could he please have his hot

water turned on.

That done, he ascended to the studio again and bolted the door behind him. One

conversation for the day was enough, he'd decided. He drew the blinds at the windows and

lit two candles. They smoked as their dusty wicks first burned, but their light was kinder

than the glare of the day, and by it he started to go through the snowdrift of mail that had

gathered behind the door. There were bills in abundance, of course, printed in increasingly

irate colors, plus the inevitable junk mail. There were very few personal letters, but among

them were two that gave him pause. Both were from Vanessa, whose advice that he should

slit his lying throat had found such a distressing echo in Athanasius' exhortation at the

Erasure. Now she wrote that she missed him, and a day didn't go by without her thinking of

him. The second missive was even more direct. She wanted him back in her life. If he wanted

to play around with other women she would learn to accommodate that. Would he not at

least make contact with her? Life was too short to bear grudges, on either side.

He was buoyed up somewhat by her appeals, and even more so by a letter from Klein,

scrawled in red ink on pink, paper. Chester's faintly camp tones rose from the page as Gentle

scanned it.

Dear Bastard — Boy, Klein had written. Whose heart are you breaking, and where? Scores

of forlorn women are presently weeping on my lap, begging me to forgive you your

trespasses and invite you back into the bosom of the family. Among them, the delectable

Vanessa. For God's sake come home and save me from seducing her. My groin is wet for you,

So Vanessa had gone to Klein; desperation indeed. Though she'd met Chester only once

that Gentle could recall, she'd subsequently professed to loathing him. Gentle kept all three

letters, though he had no intention of acting upon their appeals. There was only one reunion

he was eager for, and that was with the house in Clerkenwell. He couldn't face the idea of

venturing out in daylight, however. The streets would be too bright and too busy. He'd wait

until dark, when he could move across the city as the invisible he aspired to be. He set a

match to the rest of the letters and watched them burn. Then he went back to bed and slept

through the afternoon in preparation for the business of the night.

He waited until the first stars appeared in a sky of elegiac blue before he raised the blinds.

The street outside was quiet, but given that he lacked the cash for a cab he knew he'd have

to brush shoulders with a lot of people before he reached Clerkenwell. On a fine evening like

this, the Edgware Road would be busy, and there'd be crowds on the Underground. His best

hope of reaching his destination unscrutinized was to dress as blandly as possible, and he

took some time hunting through his depleted wardrobe for those clothes that would render

him most invisible. Once dressed, he walked down to Marble Arch and boarded the

Underground. It was only five stations to Chancery Lane, which would put him on the

borders of Clerkenwell, but after two he had to get off, gasping and sweating like a

claustrophobic. Cursing this new weakness in himself, he sat in the station for half an hour

while more trains passed through, unable to bring himself to board. What an irony! Here he

was, a sometime wanderer in the wilds of the Imajica, incapable of

traveling a couple of

miles by tube without panicking. He waited until his shaking subsided and a less crowded

train came along. Then he reboarded, sitting close to the door with his head in his hands

until the journey was over. By the time he emerged at Chancery Lane the sky had darkened,

and he stood for several minutes on High Hoiborn, his head thrown back, soaking up the sky.

Only when the tremors had left his legs did he head up Gray's Inn Road towards the environs

of Gamut Street. Almost all the property on the main thoroughfares had long since been

turned to commercial use, but there was a network of streets and squares behind the

barricade of darkened office buildings which, protected perhaps by the patronage of

notoriety, had been left untouched by the developers. Many of these streets were narrow

and mazy, their lamps unlit, their signs missing, as though blind eyes had been turned to

them over the generations. But he didn't need signs and lamps; his feet had trodden these

ways countless times. Here was Shiverick Square, with its little park all overgrown, and

Flaxen Street, and Almoth, and Sterne. And in their midst, cocooned by anonymity, his

destination.

He saw the corner of Gamut Street twenty yards ahead and slowed his pace to take

pleasure in the moment of reunion. There were innumerable memories

awaiting him there,

the mystif among them. But not all would be so sweet, or so welcome.
He would have to

ingest them carefully, like a diner with a delicate stomach coming to a
lavish table.

Moderation was the way. As soon as he felt a surfeit, he'd retreat and
return to the studio to

digest what he'd learned, let it strengthen him. Only then would he
return for a second

helping. The process would take time, he knew, and time was of the
essence. But so was his

sanity. What use would he be as a Reconciler if he choked on the
past?

With his heart thumping hard, he came to the corner and, turning it,
finally laid his eyes

upon the sacred street. Perhaps, during his years of forgetfulness, he'd
wandered through

these backwaters all unknowing and seen the sight before him now.
But he doubted it. More

likely, his eyes were seeing Gamut Street for the first time in two
centuries. It had changed

scarcely at all, preserved from the city planners and their hammer-
wielding hordes by the

feits whose makers were still rumored here. The trees planted along
the pavement were

weighed down with unkempt foliage, but their sap's tang was sharp,
the air protected from

the fumes of Holborn and Gray's Inn Road by the warren of
thoroughfares between. Was it

just his fancy, or was the tree outside number 28 particularly lush, fed
perhaps by a seepage

of magics from the step of the Maestro's house?

He began towards them, tree and step, the memories already returning in force. He heard

the children singing behind him, the song that had so tormented him when the Autarch had

told him who he was. Sartori, he'd said, and this charmless ditty, sung by piping voices, had

come in pursuit of the name. He'd loathed it then. Its melody was banal; its words were

nonsense. But now he remembered how he'd first heard it, walking along this very pavement

with the children in procession on the opposite shore, and how flattered he'd been that he

was famous enough to have reached the lips of children who would never read or write or,

most probably, reach the age of puberty. .All of London knew who he was, and he liked his

fame. He was talked about at court, Roxborough said, and should soon expect an invitation.

People who'd not so much as touched his sleeve were claiming intimate association.

But there were still those, thank God, who kept an exquisite distance, and one such soul

had lived, he remembered, in the house opposite: a nymph called Allegra who liked to sit at

her dressing table near the window with her bodice half unlaced, knowing she had an

admirer in the Maestro across the street. She'd had a little curly-haired dog, and sometimes

in the evening he'd hear her piping voice summon the lucky hound onto her lap, where she'd

let it snuggle. One afternoon, a few paces from where he stood now, he'd met the girl out

walking with her mother and had made much of the dog, suffering its little tongue on his

mouth for the smell of her sex in its fur. What had become of that child? Had she died a

virgin or grown old and fat, wondering about the man who'd been her most ardent admirer?

He glanced up at the window where Allegra had sat. No light burned in it now. The house,

like almost all these buildings, was dark. Sighing, he turned his gaze towards number 28

and, crossing the street, went to the door. It was locked, of course, but one of the lower

windows had been broken at some point and never repaired. He reached through the

smashed pane and unlocked it, then slid the window up and himself inside. Slowly, he

reminded himself; go slowly. Keep the flow under control.

It was dark, but he'd come prepared for that eventuality, with candle and matches. The

flame guttered at first, and the room rocked at its indecision, but by degrees it strengthened,

and he felt a sensation he'd not expected swelling like the light: pride. In its time, this, his

house, had been a place of great souls and great ambition, where all commonplace debate

had been banned. If you wanted to talk politics or tittle-tattle you went to the coffee house;

if you wanted commerce, to the Exchange. Here, only miracles. Here,

only the rising of the

spirit. And, yes, love, if it was pertinent (which it was, so often); and sometimes bloodletting.

But never the prosaic, never the trivial. Here the man who brought the strangest tale was

the most welcome. Here every excess was celebrated if it brought visions, and every vision

analyzed for the hints it held to the nature of the Everlasting.

He lifted the candle and, holding it high, began to walk through the house. The rooms —

there were many—were badly dilapidated, the boards creaking under his feet, weakened by

rot and worm, the walls mapping continents of damp. But the present didn't insist upon him

for long. By the time he reached the bottom of the stairs, memory was lighting candles

everywhere, their luminescence spilling through the dining room door and from the rooms

above. It was a generous light, clothing naked walls, putting lush carpets underfoot, and

setting fine furniture on their pile. Though the debaters here might have aspired to pure

spirit, they were not averse to comforting the flesh while still cursed with it. Who would

have guessed, seeing the modest facade of the house from the street, that the interior would

be so finely furnished and ornamented? And seeing these glories appear, he heard the voice s

of those who'd wallowed in that luxury. Laughter first; then vociferous argument from

somebody at the top of the stairs. He couldn't see the debaters yet—

perhaps his mind, which

he'd instructed in caution, was holding the flood back—but he could put names to both of

them, sight unseen. One was Horace Tyrwhitt, the other Isaac Abelow. And the laughter?

That was Joshua Godolphin, of course. He had a laugh like the Devil's laugh, full and throaty.

“Come on, then,” Gentle said aloud to the memories. “I’m ready to see your faces.”

And as he spoke, they came: Tyrwhitt on the stairs, overdressed and overpowdered, as

ever, keeping his distance from Abelow in case the magpie his pursuer was nursing flew

free.

“It's bad luck,” Tyrwhitt was protesting. “Birds in the house are bad luck!”

“Luck's for fishermen and gamblers,” Abelow replied.

“One of these days you'll turn a phrase worth remembering,” Tyrwhitt replied. “Just get the

thing out before I wring its neck.” He turned towards Gentle. “Tell him, Sartori.”

Gentle was shocked to see the memory's eyes fix so acutely upon him. “It does no harm,” he

found himself replying. “It's one of God's creatures.”

At which point the bird rose flapping from Abelow's grasp, emptying its bowels as it did so

on the man's wig and face, which brought a hoot of laughter from Tyrwhitt.

“Now don't wipe it off,” he told Abelow as the magpie fluttered away. “It's good luck.”

The sound of his laughter brought Joshua Godolphin, imperious as ever, out of the dining

room. "What's the row?"

Abelove was already clattering after the bird, his calls merely alarming it more. It fluttered

around the hallway in panic, cawing as it went.

"Open the damned door!" Godolphin said. "Let the bloody thing out!"

"And spoil the sport?" Tyrwhitt said.

"If everyone would but calm their voices," Abelove said, "it would settle."

"Why did you bring it in?" Joshua wanted to know.

"It was sitting on the step," Abelove replied. "I thought it was injured."

"It looks quite well to me," Godolphin said, and turned his face, ruddied with brandy,

towards Gentle. "Maestro," he said, inclining his head a little. "I'm afraid we began dinner

without you. Come in. Leave these bird brains to play."

Gentle was crossing to the dining room when there was a thud behind him, and he turned

to see the bird dropping to the floor beneath one of the windows, where it had struck the

glass. Abelove let out a little moan, and Tyrwhitt's laughter ceased.

"There now!" he said. "You killed the thing!"

"Not me!" Abelove said.

"You want to resurrect it?" Joshua murmured to Gentle, his tone conspiratorial.

"With a broken neck and wings?" Gentle mourned. "That wouldn't be

very kind.”

“But amusing,” Godolphin replied with mischief in his puffy eyes.

“I think not,” Gentle said, and saw his distaste wipe the humor off Joshua's face. He's a

little afraid of me, Gentle thought; the power in me makes him nervous.

Joshua headed into the dining room, and Gentle was about to step through the door after

him when a young man—eighteen at most, with a plain, long face and chorister's curls—

came to his side.

“Maestro?” he said.

Unlike Joshua and the others, these features seemed more familiar to Gentle. Perhaps there

was a certain modernity in the languid lidded gaze and the small, almost effeminate, mouth.

He didn't look that intelligent, in truth, but his words, when they came, were well turned,

despite the boy's nervousness. He barely dared look at Sartori, but with those lids downcast

begged the Maestro's indulgence.

“I wondered, sir, if you had perhaps considered the matter of which we spoke?”

Gentle was about to ask, What matter?, when his tongue replied, his intellect seizing the

memory as the words spilled out. “I know how eager you are, Lucius.”

Lucius Cobbitt was the boy's name. At seventeen he already had the great works by heart,

or at least their theses. Ambitious and apt at politics, he'd taken Tyrwhitt as a patron (for

what services only his bed knew, but it was surely a hanging offense) and had secured

himself a place in the house as a menial. But he wanted more than that, and scarcely an

evening went by without his politely plying the Maestro with coy glances and pleas.

"I'm more than eager, sir," he said. "I've studied all the rituals. I've mapped the In Ovo,

from what I've read in Flute's Visions. They're just beginnings, I know, but I've also copied

all the known glyphs, and I have them by heart."

He had a little skill as an artist, too: something else they shared, besides ambition and

dubious morals.

"I can help you, Maestro," he was saying. "You're going to need somebody beside you on

the night."

"I commend you on your discipline, Lucius, but the Reconciliation's a dangerous business. I

can't take the responsibility—"

"I'll take that, sir."

"Besides, I have my assistant."

The boy's face fell. "You do?" he said.

"Certainly. Pie 'oh' pah."

"You'd trust your life to a familiar?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Well, because... because it's not even human."

"That's why I trust it, Lucius," Gentle said. "I'm sorry to disappoint

you—”

“Could I at least watch, sir? I'll keep my distance, I swear, I swear.
Everybody else is going
to be there.”

This was true enough. As the night of the Reconciliation approached,
the size of the

audience swelled. His patrons, who'd at first taken their oaths of
secrecy very seriously, now

sensed triumph and had become indiscreet. In hushed and often
embarrassed tones they'd

admit to having invited a friend or a relation to witness the rites, and
who was he, the

performer, to forbid his paymasters their moment of reflected glory?
Though he never gave

them an easy time when they made these confessions, he didn't much
mind. Admiration

charged the blood. And when the Reconciliation had been achieved,
the more tongues there

were to say they'd seen it done, and sanctify the doer, the better.

“I beg you, sir,” Lucius was saying. “I'll be in your debt forever.”

Gentle nodded, ruffling the youth's ginger hair. “You may watch,” he
said.

Tears started to the boy's eyes, and he snatched up Gentie's hand,
laying his lips to it. “I am

the luckiest man in England,” he said. “Thank you, sir, thank you.”

Quieting the boy's profusions, Gentle left him at the door and stepped
through into the

dining room. As he did so he wondered if all these events and
conversations had actually

dovetailed in this fashion, or whether his memory was collecting fragments from different

nights and days, knitting them together so that they appeared seamless. If the latter was the

case—and he guessed it was—then there were probably clues in these scenes to mysteries

yet to be unveiled, and he should try to remember their every detail. But it was difficult. He

was both Gentle and Sartori here, both witness and actor. It was hard to live the moments

when he was also observing them, and harder still to dig for the seam of their significance

when their surface gleamed so fetchingly, and when he was the brightest jewel that shone

there. How they had idolized him! He'd been like a divinity among them, his every belch and

fart attended to like a sermon, his cosmological pronouncements—of which he was too

fond—greeted with reverence and gratitude, even by the mightiest.

Three of those mighty awaited him in the dining room, gathered at one end of a table, set

for four but laden with sufficient food to sate the street for a week. Joshua was one of the

trio, of course. Roxborough and his long—time foil Oliver McGann were the others, the latter

well in his cups, the former, as ever, keeping his counsel, his ascetic features, dominated by

the long hook of his nose, always half masked by his hands. He despised his mouth, Gentle

thought, because it betrayed his nature, which despite his incalculable wealth and his

pretensions to metaphysics was peevish, penurious, and sullen.

“Religion's for the faithful,” McGann was loudly opining. “They say their prayers, their

prayers aren't answered, and their faith increases. Whereas magic—” He stopped, laying his

inebriated gaze on the Maestro at the door. “Ah! The very man! The very man! Tell him,

Sartori! Tell him what magic is.”

Roxborough had made a pyramid of his fingers, the apex at the bridge of his nose. “Yes,

Maestro,” he said. “Do tell.”

“My pleasure,” Gentle replied, taking the glass of wine McGann poured for him and wetting

his throat before he provided tonight's profundities. “Magic is the first and last religion of

the world,” he said. “It has the power to make us whole. To open our eyes to the Dominions

and return us to ourselves.”

“That sounds very fine,” Roxborough said flatly. “But what does it mean?”

“It's obvious what it means,” McGann protested.

“Not to me it isn't.”

“It means we're born divided, Roxborough,” the Maestro replied. “But we long for union.”

“Oh, we do, do we?”

“I believe so.”

“And why should we seek union with ourselves?” Roxborough said. “Tell me that. I would

have thought we're the only company we're certain we have.”

There was a riling smugness to the man's tone, but the Maestro had heard these niceties

before and had his answers well honed.

“Everything that isn't us is also ourselves,” he said. He came to the table and set down his

glass, peering through the smoky candle flames at Roxborough's black eyes. “We're joined to

everything that was, is, and will be,” he said. “From one end of the Imajica to another. From

the tiniest mote dancing over this flame to the Godhead Itself.”

He took breath, leaving room for a retort from Roxborough. But none came.

“We'll not be subsumed at our deaths,” he went on. “We'll be increased: to the size of

Creation.”

“Yes...” McGann said, the word coming long and loud from between teeth clenched in a

tigerish smile.

“Magic's our means to that Revelation,” the Maestro said, “while we're still in our flesh.”

“And is it your opinion that we are given that Revelation?”

Roxborough replied. “Or are we

stealing it?”

“We were born to know as much as we can know.”

“We were born to suffer in our flesh,” Roxborough said.

“You may suffer; I don't.”

The reply won a guffaw from McGann.

“The flesh isn't punishment,” the Maestro said, “it's there for joy. But

it also marks the

place where we end and the rest of Creation begins. Or so we believe.
It's an illusion, of

course.”

“Good,” said Godolphin. “I like that.”

“So are we about God's business or not?” Roxborough wanted to know.

“Are you having second thoughts?”

“Third and fourth, more like,” McGann said.

Roxborough gave the man at his side a sour glance. “Did we swear an oath not to doubt?”

he said. “I don't think so. Why should I be castigated because I ask a simple question?”

“I apologize,” McGann said. “Tell the man, Maestro. We're doing God's work, aren't we?”

“Does God want us to be more than we are?” Gentle said. “Of course. Does God want us to

love, which is the desire to be joined and made whole? Of course. Does It want us in Its

glory, forever and ever? Yes, It does.”

“You always say It,” McGann observed. “Why's that?”

“Creation and its maker are one and the same. True or false?”

“True.”

“And Creation's as full of women as it is of men. True or false?”

“Oh, true, true.”

“Indeed, I give thanks for the fact night and day,” Gentle said, glancing at Godolphin as he

spoke. “Beside my bed and in it.”

Joshua laughed his Devil's laugh.

"So the Godhead is both male and female. For convenience, an It."

"Bravely said!" Joshua announced. "I never tire of hearing you speak, Sartori. My thoughts

get muddy, but after I've listened to you awhile they're like spring water, straight from the

rock!"

"Not too clean, I hope," the Maestro said. "We don't want any Puritan souls spoiling the

Reconciliation."

"You know me better than that," Joshua said, catching Gentle's eye.

Even as he did so, Gentle had proof of his suspicion that these encounters, though

remembered in one continuous stream, had not occurred sequentially but were fragments

his mind was knitting together as the rooms he was walking through evoked them. McGann

and Roxborough faded from the table, as did most of the candlelight and the litter of carafes,

glasses, and food it had illuminated. Now there was only Joshua and himself, and the house

was stilt above and below. Everyone asleep, but for these conspirators.

"I want to be with you when you perform the working," Joshua was saying. There was no

hint of laughter now. He looked harassed and nervous. "She's very precious to me, Sartori. If

anything were to happen to her I'd lose my mind."

"She'll be perfectly safe," the Maestro said, sitting down at the table.

There was a map of the Imajica laid out in front of him, with the

names of the Maestros and

their assistants in each Dominion marked beside their places of
conjunction. He scanned

them and found he knew one or two. Tick Raw was there, as the
deputy to Uter Musky;

Scopique was there too, marked as an assistant to an assistant to
Heratae Hammeryock, the

latter a distant relation, perhaps, of the Hammeryock whom Gentle
and Pie had encountered

in Vanaeph. Names from two pasts, intersecting here on the map.

“Are you listening to me?” Joshua said.

“I told you she'd be perfectly safe,” came the Maestro's reply. “The
workings are delicate,

but they're not dangerous.”

“Then let me be there,” Godolphin said, wringing his hands. “I'll be
your assistant instead

of that wretched mystif.”

“I haven't even told Pie 'oh' pah what we're up to. This is our business
and only ours. You

just bring Judith here tomorrow evening, and I'll see to the rest.”

“She's so vulnerable.”

“She seems very self-possessed to me,” the Maestro observed. “Very
heated.”

Godolphin's fretful expression soured into ice. “Don't parade it,
Sartori,” he said. “It's not

enough that I've got Roxborough at my ear all yesterday, telling me he
doesn't trust you; I

have to bear you parading your arrogance.”

“Roxborough understands nothing.”

“He says you're obsessed with women, so he understands that, at least. You watch some

girl across the street, he says—”

“What if I do?”

“How can you give yourself to the Reconciliation if you're so distracted?”

“Are you trying to talk me out of wanting Judith?”

“I thought magic was a religion to you.”

“So's she.”

“A discipline, a sacred mystery.”

“Again, so's she.” He laughed. “When I first saw her, it was like my first glimpse of another

world. I knew I'd risk my life to be inside her skin. When I'm with her, I feel like an adept

again, creeping towards a miracle, step by step. Tentative, excited—”

“Enough!”

“Really? You don't want to know why I need to be inside her so badly?”

Godolphin eyed him ruefully. “Not really,” he said. “But if you don't tell me, I'll only

wonder.”

“Because for a little time, I'll forget who I am. Everything petty and particular will go out of

me. My ambition. My history. Everything. I'll be unmade. And that's when I'm closest to

divinity.”

“Somehow you always manage to bring everything back to that. Even

your lust.”

“It's all One.”

“I don't like your talk of the One,” Godolphin said.

“You sound like Roxborough with his die turns! Simplicity is strength and all the rest.”

“That's not what I mean and you know it. It's just that women are where everything begins,

and I like—how shall I put it? — to touch the source as often as possible.”

“You think you're perfect, don't you?” Godolphin said.

“Why so sour? A week ago you were doting on my every word.”

“I don't like what we're doing,” Godolphin replied. “I want Judith for myself.”

“You'll have her. And so will I. That's the glory of this.”

“There'll be no difference between them?”

“None. They'll be identical. To the pucker. To the lash.”

“So why must I have the copy?”

“You know the answer to that. Because the original loves me, not you.”

“I should never have let you set eyes on her.”

“You couldn't have kept us apart. Don't look so forlorn. I'm going to make you a Judith

that'll dote on you and your sons, and your son's sons, until the name Godolphin disappears

off the face of the earth. Now where's the harm in that?”

As he asked the question all the candles but the one he held went out, and the past was

extinguished with them. He was suddenly back in the empty house, a

police siren whooping

“nearby. He stepped back into the hallway as the car sped down Gamut Street, its blue light

pulsing through the windows. Seconds later, another came howling after. Though the din of

the sirens faded and finally disappeared, the flashes did not. They brightened from blue to

white, however, and lost their regularity. By their brilliance he saw the house once more

restored to glory. It was no longer a place of debate and laughter however. There was

sobbing above and below, and the animal smells of fear in every corner. Thunder rattled the

roof, but there was no rain to soothe its choler.

I don't want to be here, he thought. The other memories had entertained him. He'd liked

his role in the proceedings.

But this darkness was another matter entirely. It was full of death, and he wanted to run

from it.

The lightning came again, horribly livid. By it, he saw Lucius Cobbitt standing halfway up

the stairs, clutching the banister as though he'd fall if he didn't. He'd bitten his tongue or lip,

or both, and blood dribbled from his mouth and chin, made stringy by the spit with which it

was mingled. When Gentle climbed the stairs he smelt excrement. The boy had loosed his

bowels in his breeches. Seeing Gentle, he raised his eyes.

“How did it fail, Maestro?” he sobbed. “How?” Gentle shuddered as the question brought

images flooding into his head, more horrendous than all the scenes he'd witnessed at the

Erasure. The failure of the Reconciliation had been sudden, and calamitous, and had caught

the Maestros representing the five Dominions at such a delicate time in the working that

they'd been ill—equipped to prevent it. The spirits of all five had already risen from their

circles across Imajica and, carrying the analogues of their worlds, had converged on the Ana,

the zone of inviolability that appeared every two centuries in the heart of the In Ovo. There,

for a tender time, miracles could be worked, as the Maestros, safe from the In Ovo's

inhabitants but freed and empowered by their immaterial state, unburdened themselves of

their similitudes and allowed the genius of the Ana to complete the fusing of the Dominions.

It was a precarious time, but they'd been reaching its conclusion when the circle in which

the Maestro Sartori's physical body sat, its stones protecting the outside world from the flux

which let on to the In Ovo, broke. Of all the potential places for failure in the ceremonies,

this was the unlikeliest: tantamount to transubstantiation failing for want o f salt in the

bread. But fail it did, and once the breach was opened, there was no way to seal it until the

Maestros had returned to their bodies and mustered their feits. In that time the hungry

tenants of the In Ovo had free access to the Fifth. Not only to the Fifth, but to the exulted

flesh of the Maestros themselves, who vacated the Ana in confusion, leading the hounds of

the In Ovo back to their flesh.

Sartori's life would certainly have been forfeited along with all the others had Pie 'oh' pah

not intervened. When the circle broke, Pie was being forcibly removed from the Retreat on

Godolphin's order, for voicing a prophetic murmur of alarm and disturbing the audience.

The duty of removal had fallen to Abelow and Lucius Cobbitt, but neither had possessed the

strength to hold the mystif. It had broken free, racing across the Retreat and plunging into

the circle, where its master was visible to the assembly only as a blaze of light. The mystif

had learned well at Sartori's feet. It had defenses against the flux of power that roared in the

circle and had pulled the Maestro from under the noses of the approaching Oviates.

The rest of the assembly, however, caught between the mystif's yells of warning and

Roxborough's attempts to maintain the status quo, were still standing around in confusion

when the Oviates appeared.

The entities were swift. One moment the Retreat was a bridge to the transcendental; the

next, it was an abattoir. Dazed by his sudden fall from grace, the Maestro had seen only

snatches of the massacre, but they were burned on his eyes, and

Gentle remembered them

now in all their wretched detail: Abelow, scrabbling at the ground in terror as an Oviat the

size of a felled bull, but resembling something barely born, opened its toothless maw and

drew him between its jaws with tongues the length of whips; McGann, losing his arm to a

sleek dark animal that rippled as it ran but hauling himself away, his blood a scarlet

fountain, while the thing was distracted by fresher meat; and Flores—poor Flores, who'd

come to Gamut Street the day before, carrying a letter of introduction from Casanova —

caught by two beasts whose skulls were as flat as spades and whose translucent skin had

given Sartori a terrible glimpse of their victim's agony as his head was taken down the

throat of one while his legs were devoured by the other.

But it was the death of Roxborough's sister that Gentle remembered with profoundest

horror, not least because the man had been at such pains to keep her from coming and had

even abased himself to the Maestro, begging him to talk to the woman and persuade her to

stay away. He'd had the talk, but he'd knowingly made his caution a seduction—almost

literally, in fact—and she'd come to see the Reconciliation as much to meet the eyes of the

man who'd wooed her with his warnings as for the ceremony itself. She'd paid the most

terrible price. She'd been fought over like a bone among hungry

wolves, shrieking a prayer

for deliverance as a trio of Oviates drew out her entrails and dabbled in her open skull. By

the time the Maestro, with Pie 'oh' pah's help, had raised sufficient feits to drive the entities

back into the circle, she was dying in her own coils, thrashing like a fish half filleted by a

hook.

Only later did the Maestro hear of the atrocities visited on the other circles. It was the

same story there as in the Fifth: the Oviates appearing in the midst of innocents; carnage

ensuing, which was only brought to a halt when one of the Maestro's assistants drove them

back. With the exception of Sartori, the Maestros themselves had all perished.

“It would be better if I'd died like the others,” he said to Lucius.

The boy tried to persuade him otherwise, but tears overwhelmed him. There was another

voice, however, rising from the bottom of the stairs, raw with grief but strong.

“Sartori! Sartori!”

He turned. Joshua was there in the hallway, his fine powder—blue coat covered with

blood. As were his hands. As was his face.

“What's going to happen?” he yelled, “This storm! It's going to tear the world ap art!”

“No, Joshua.”

“Don't lie to me! There's never been a storm like this! Ever!”

“Control yourself—”

“Jesus Christ our Lord, forgive us our trespasses.”

“That's not going to help, Joshua.”

Godolphin had a crucifix in his hand and put it to his lips.

“You Godless trash! Are you a demon? Is that it? Were you sent to have our souls?” Tears

were pouring down his crazed face. “What Hell did you come out of?”

“The same as you. The human hell.”

“I should have listened to Roxborough. He knew! He said over and over you had some plan,

and I didn't believe him, wouldn't believe him, because Judith loved you, and how could

anything so pure love anything unholy? But you hid yourself from her too, didn't you? Poor,

sweet Judith! How did you make her love you? How did you do it?”

“Is that all you can think of?”

“Tell me! How?”

Barely coherent in his fury, Godolphin started up the stairs towards the seducer.

Gentle felt his hand go to his mouth. Godolphin halted. He knew this power.

“Haven't we shed enough blood tonight?” the Maestro said.

“You, not me,” Godolphin replied. He jabbed a finger in Gentle's direction, the crucifix

hanging from his fist. “You'll have no peace after this,” he said.

“Roxborough's already

talking about a purge, and I'm going to give him every guinea he

needs to break your back.

You and all your works are damned!"

"Even Judith?"

"I never want to see that creature again."

"But she's yours, Joshua," the Maestro said flatly, descending the stairs as he spoke. "She's

yours forever and ever. She won't age. She won't die. She belongs to the family Godolphin

until the sun goes out."

"Then I'll kill her."

"And have her innocent soul on your blotted conscience?"

"She's got no soul!"

"I promised you Judith to the lash, and that's what she is. A religion. A discipline. A sacred

mystery. Remember?"

Godolphin buried his face in his hands.

"She's the one truly innocent soul left among us, Joshua. Preserve her. Love her as you've

never loved any living thing, because she's our only victory." He took hold of Godolphin's

hands and unmasked him. "Don't be ashamed of our ambition," he said. "And don't believe

anyone who tells you it was the Devil's doing. We did what we did out of love."

"Which?" Godolphin said. "Making her, or the Reconciliation?"

"It's all One," he replied. "Believe that, at least."

Godolphin claimed his hands from the Maestro's grip. "I'll never believe anything again" he

said and, turning his back, began his weary descent.

Standing on the stairs, watching the memory disappear, Gentle said a second fare well. He

had never seen Godolphin again after that night. A few weeks later the man had retreated to

his estate and sealed himself up there, living in silent self-mortification until despair had

burst his tender heart.

“It was my fault,” said the boy on the stairs behind him.

Gentle had forgotten Lucius was still there, watching and listening. He turned back to the

child.

“No,” he said, “You're not to blame.”

Lucius had wiped the blood from his chin, but he couldn't control his trembling. His teeth

chattered between his stumbling words. “I did everything you told me to do,” he said. “I

swear. I swear. But I must have missed some words from the rites or... I don't know... maybe

mixed up the stones.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The stones you gave me, to replace the flawed ones.”

“I gave you no stones, Lucius.”

“But Maestro, you did. Two stones, to go in the circle. You told me to bury the ones I took,

at the step. Don't you remember?”

Listening to the boy, Gentle finally understood how the Reconciliation had come to grief.

His other—born in the upper room of this very house—had used Lucius as his agent,

sending him to replace a part of the circle with stones that resembled the originals (forging

ran in the blood), knowing they would not preserve the circle's integrity when the ceremony

reached its height.

But while the man who was remembering these scenes understood how all this had come

about, to Maestro Sartori, still ignorant of the other self he'd created in the womb of the

doubling circle, this remained an unfathomable mystery.

“I gave you no such instruction,” he said to Lucius.

“I understand,” the youth replied. “You have to lay the blame at my feet. That's why

Maestros need adepts. I begged you for the responsibility, and I'm glad to have had it even if

I failed.” He reached into his pocket as he spoke. “Forgive me, Maestro,” he said and, drawing

out a knife, had it at his heart in the space of a thunderclap. As the tip drew blood the

Maestro caught hold of the youth's hand and, wrenching the blade from his fingers, threw it

down the stairs.

“Who gave you permission to do that?” he said to Lucius. “I thought you wanted to be an

adept?”

“I did,” the boy said.

“And now you're out of love with it. You see humiliation and you want no more of the

business.”

“No!” Lucius protested. “I still want wisdom. But I failed tonight.”

“We all failed tonight!” the Maestro said. He took hold of the trembling boy and spoke to

him softly. “I don't know how this tragedy came about,” he said. “But I sniff more than your

shite in the air. Some plot was here, laid against our high ambition, and perhaps if I hadn't

been blinded by my own glory I'd have seen it. The fault isn't yours, Lucius. And stopping

your own life won't bring Abelow, or Esther, or any of the others back. Listen to me.”

“I'm listening.”

“Do you still want to be my adept?”

“Of course.”

“Will you obey my instructions now, to the letter?”

“Anything. Just tell me what you need from me.”

“Take my books, all that you can carry, and go as far from here as you're able to go. To the

other end of the Imajica, if you can learn the trick of it. Somewhere Roxborough and his

hounds won't ever find you. There's a hard winter coming for men like us. It'll kill all but the

cleverest. But you can be clever, can't you?”

“Yes.”

“I knew it.” The Maestro smiled. “You must teach yourself in secret, Lucius, and you must

learn to live outside time. That way, the years won't wither you, and when Roxborough's

dead you'll be able to try again.”

“Where will you be, Maestro?”

“Forgotten, if I'm lucky. But never forgiven, I think. That would be too much to hope for.

Don't look so dejected, Lucius. I have to know there's some hope, and I'm charging you to

carry it for me.”

“It's my honor, Maestro.”

As he replied, Gentle was once again grazed by the déjà vu he'd first felt when he'd

encountered Lucius outside the dining room door. But the touch was light, and passed

before he could make sense of it.

“Remember, Lucius, that everything you learn is already part of you, even to the Godhead

Itself. Study nothing except in the knowledge that you already knew it. Worship nothing

except in adoration of your true self. And fear nothing”—there the Maestro stopped and

shuddered, as though he had a presentiment—“fear nothing except in the certainty that you

are your enemy's begetter and its only hope of healing. For everything that does evil is in

pain. Will you remember those things?”

The boy looked uncertain. “As best I can,” he said.

“That will have to suffice,” the Maestro said. “Now ... get out of here before the purgers

come.”

He let go of the boy's shoulders, and Cobbitt retreated down the stairs, backwards, like a

commoner from the king, only turning and heading away when he was at the bottom.

The storm was overhead now, and with the boy gone, taking his sewer stench with him, the

smell of electricity was strong. The candle Gentle held flickered, and for an instant he

thought it was going to be extinguished, signaling the end of these recollections, at least for

tonight. But there was more to come.

"That was kind," he heard Pie 'oh' pah say, and turned to see the mystif standing at the top

of the stairs. It had discarded its soiled clothes with its customary fastidiousness, but the

plain shirt and trousers it wore were all the finery it needed to appear in perfection. There

was no face in the Imajica more beautiful than this, Gentle thought, nor form more graceful,

and the scenes of terror and recrimination the storm had brought were of little consequence

while he bathed in the sight of it. But the Maestro he had been had not yet made the error of

losing this—miracle and, seeing the mystif, was more concerned that his deceits had been

discovered.

"Were you here when Godolphin came?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then you know about Judith?"

"I can guess."

"I kept it from you because I knew you wouldn't approve."

"It's not my place to approve or otherwise. I'm not your wife, that you should fear my
censure."

"Still, I do. And I thought, well, when the Reconciliation was done this would seem like a

little indulgence, and you'd say I deserved it because of what I'd achieved. Now it seems like

a crime, and I wish it could be undone."

"Do you? Truly?" the mystif said.

The Maestro looked up. "No, I don't," he said, his tone that of a man surprised by a

revelation. He started to climb the stairs. "I suppose I must believe what I told Godolphin,

about her being our..."

"Victory," Pie prompted, stepping aside to let the summoner step into the Meditation

Room. It was, as ever, bare. "Shall I leave you alone?" Pie asked.

"No," the Maestro said hurriedly. Then, more quietly: "Please. No."

He went to the window from which .he had stood those many evenings watching the

nymph Allegra at her toilet. The branches of the tree he'd spied her through thrashed

themselves to splinter and pulp against the panes.

"Can you make me forget, Pie 'oh' pah? There are such feits, aren't there?"

"Of course. But is that what you want?"

"No, what I really want is death, but I'm too afraid of that at the moment. So ... it will have

to be forgetfulness.”

“The true Maestro folds pain into his experience.”

“Then I'm not a true Maestro,” he returned. “I don't have the courage for that. Make me

forget, mystify. Divide me from what I've done and what I am forever. Make a feat that'll be a

river between me and this moment, so that I'm never tempted to cross it.”

“How will you live?”

The Maestro puzzled over this for a few moments. “In increments,” he finally replied. “Each

part ignorant of the part before. Well. You can do this for me?”

“Certainly.”

“It's what I did for the woman I made for Godolphin. Every ten years she'll start to undo

her life and disappear. Then she'll invent another one and live it, never knowing what she

left behind.”

Listening to himself plot the life he'd lived, Gentle heard a perverse satisfaction in his

voice. He had condemned himself to two hundred years of waste, but he'd known what he

was doing. He'd made the same arrangements precisely for the second Judith and had

contemplated every consequence on her behalf. It wasn't just cowardice that made him shun

these memories. It was a kind of revenge upon himself for failing, to banish his future to the

same limbo he'd made for his creature.

"I'll have pleasure, Pie," he said. "I'll wander the world and enjoy the moments. I just won't

have the sum of them."

"And what about me?"

"After this, you're free to go," he said.

"And do what? Be what?"

"Whore or assassin, I don't care," the Maestro said.

The remark had been thrown off casually—surely not intended as an order to the mystif.

But was it a slave's duty to distinguish between a command made for the humor of it and

one to be followed absolutely? No, it was a slave's duty to obey, especially if the dictate

came, as did this, from a beloved mouth. Here, with a throwaway remark, the master had

circumscribed his servant's life for two centuries, driving it to deeds it had doubtless

abhorred.

Gentle saw the tears shining in the mystif's eyes and felt its suffering like a hammer

pounding at his heart. He hated himself then, for his arrogance and his carelessness, for not

seeing the harm he was doing a creature that only wanted to love him and be near him. And

he longed more than ever to be reunited with Pie, so that he could beg forgiveness for this

cruelty.

"Make me forget," he said again. "I want an end to this."

The mystif was speaking, Gentle saw, though whatever incantations its lips shaped were

spoken in a voice he couldn't hear. The breath that bore them made the flame he'd set on the

floor flicker, however, and as the mystif instructed its master in forgetfulness the memories

went out with the flame.

Gentle rummaged for the box of matches and struck one, using its light to find the smoking

wick, then reigniting it. But the night of storm had passed back into history, and Pie 'oh' pah,

beautiful, obedient, loving Pie 'oh' pah, had gone with it. He sat down in front of the candle

and waited, wondering if there was some coda to come. But the house was dead from cellar

to eaves.

“So,” he said to himself. “What now, Maestro?”

He had his answer from his stomach, which made a little thunder of its own.

“You want food?” he asked it, and it gurgled its reply. “Me too,” he said.

He got up and started down the stairs, preparing himself for a return to modernity. As he

reached the bottom, however, he heard something scraping across the bare boards. He

raised the candle, and his voice.

“Who's there?”

Neither the light nor his demand brought an answer. But the sound went on, and others

joined it, none of them pleasant: a low, agonized moan; a wet,

dragging sound; a whistling

inhalation. What melodrama was his memory preparing to stage for him, he wondered, that

had need of these hoary devices? They might have inspired fear in him once upon a time, but

not now. He'd seen too many horrors face to face to be chilled by imitations.

"What's this about?" he asked the shadows, and was somewhat surprised to have his

question answered.

"We've waited for you a long time," a wheezing voice told him.

"Sometimes we thought you'd never come home," another said. There was a fluting

femininity in its tone.

Gentle took a step in the direction of the woman, and the rim of the candle's reach touched

what looked to be the hem of a scarlet skirt, which was hastily twitched out of sight. Where

it had lain, the bare boards shone with fresh blood. He didn't advance any further, but

listened for another pronouncement from the shadows. It came soon enough. Not the woman

this time, but the wheezer.

"The fault was yours," he said. "But the pain's been ours. All these years, waiting for you."

Though corrupted by anguish, the voice was familiar. He'd heard its lilt in this very house.

"Is that Abelove?" he said.

“Do you remember the maggot-pie?” the man said, confirming his identity. “The number of

times I've thought: That was my error, bringing the bird into the house. Tyrwhitt would have

no part of it, and he survived, didn't he? He died in his dotage. And Roxborough, and

Godolphin, and you. All of you lived and died intact. But me, I just suffered here, flying

against the glass but never hard enough to cease.” He moaned, and though his rebuke was as

absurd as it had been when first uttered, this time Gentle shuddered. “I'm not alone, of

course,” Abelow said. “Esther's here. And Flores. And Byam-Shaw. And Bloxham's brother-

in-law; do you remember him? So there'll be plenty of company for you.”

“I'm not staying,” Gentle said.

“Oh, but you are,” said Esther. “It's the least you can do.”

“Blow out the candle,” Abelow said. “Save yourself the distress of seeing us. We'll put out

your eyes, and you can live with us blind.”

“I'll do no such thing,” Gentle said, raising the light so that it cast its net wider.

They appeared at its farthest edge, their viscera catching the gleam. What he'd taken to be

Esther's skirt was a train of tissue, half flayed from her hip and thigh. She clutched it still,

pulling it up around her, seeking to conceal her groin from him. Her decorum was absurd,

but then perhaps his reputation as a womanizer had so swelled over the passage of the years

that she believed he might be aroused by her, even in this appalling state. There was worse,

however. Byam-Shaw was barely recognizable as a human being, and Bloxham's brother-in-

law looked to have been chewed by tigers. But whatever their condition they were ready for

revenge, no doubt of that. At Abelove's command they began to close upon him.

"You've already been hurt enough," Gentle said. "I don't want to hurt you again. I advise

you to let me pass."

"Let you pass to do what?" Abelove replied, his terrible wounding clearer with every step

he took. His scalp had gone, and one of his eyes lolled on his cheek. When he lifted his arm to

point his next accusation at Gentle, it was with the littlest finger, which was the only one

remaining on that hand. "You want to try again, don't you? Don't deny it! You've got the old

ambition in your head!"

"You died for the Reconciliation," Gentle said. "Don't you want to see it achieved?"

"It's an abomination!" Abelove replied. "It was never meant to be! We died proving that.

You render our sacrifice worthless if you try, then fail again."

"I won't fail," Gentle said.

"No, you won't," Esther replied, dropping her skirt to uncoil a garrote of her gut. "Because

you won't get the chance."

He looked from one wretched face to the next and realized that he

didn't have a hope of

dissuading them from their intentions. They hadn't waited out the years to be diverted by

argument. They'd waited for revenge. He had no choice but to stop them with a pneuma,

regrettable as it was to add to their sum of suffering. He passed the candle from his right

hand to his left, but as he did so somebody reached around him from behind and pinned his

arms to his torso. The candle went from his fingers and rolled across the floor in the

direction of his accusers. Before it could drown in its own wax, Abelove picked it up in his

fingering hand.

“Good work, Flores,” Abelove said.

The man clutching Gentle grunted his acknowledgment, shaking his prey to prove he had it

securely caught. His arms were flayed, but they held Gentle like steel bands.

Abelove made something like a smile, though on a face with flaps for cheeks and blisters

for lips it was a misbegotten thing.

“You don't struggle,” he said, approaching Gentle with the candle held high. “Why's that?”

Are you already resigned to joining us, or do you think we'll be moved by your martyrdom

and let you go?” He was very close to Gentle now. “It is pretty,” he said. He cocked his eye a

little, sighing. “How your face was loved!” he went on. “And this

chest. How women fought to

lay their heads upon it!" He slid his stump of a hand into Gentle's shirt and tore it open.

"Very pale! And hairless! It's not Italian flesh, is it?"

"Does it matter?" said Esther. "As long as it bleeds, what do you care?"

"He never deigned to tell us anything about himself. We had to take him on trust because

he had power in his fingers and his wits. He's like a little God, Tyrwhitt used to say. But even

little Gods have fathers and mothers." Abelow leaned closer, allowing the candle flame

within singeing distance of Gentle's lashes. "Who are you really?" Abelow said. "You're not

an Italian. Are you Dutch? You could be Dutch. Or a Swiss. Chilly and precise. Huh? Is that

you?" He paused. Then: "Or are you the Devil's child?"

"Abelow," Esther protested.

"I want to know!" Abelow yelled. "I want to hear him admit he's Lucifer's son." He peered

at Gentle more closely. "Go on," he said. "Confess it."

"I'm not," Gentle said.

"There was no Maestro in Christendom could match you for feits. That kind of power has to

come from somebody. Who, Sartori?"

Gentle would have gladly told, if he'd had an answer. But he had none. "Whoever I am," he

said, "and whatever hurt I've done—"

"'Whatever,' he says!" Esther spat. "Listen to him! Whatever!"

Whatever!"

She pushed Abelove aside and tossed a loop of her gut over Gentle's head. Abelove

protested, but he'd prevaricated long enough. He was howled down from all sides, Esther's

howls the loudest. Tightening the noose around Gentle's neck, she tugged on it, preparing to

topple him. He felt rather than saw the devourers awaiting him when he fell. Something was

gnawing at his leg, something else punching his testicles. It hurt like hell, and he started to

struggle and kick. There were too many holds upon him, however—gut, arms, and teeth—

and he earned himself not an inch of latitude with his thrashings. Past the red blur of

Esther's fury, he caught sight of Abelove, crossing himself with his one-fingered hand, then

raising the candle to his mouth.

"Don't!" Gentle yelled. Even a little light was better than none. Hearing him shout, Abelove

looked up and shrugged. Then he blew out the flame. Gentle felt the wet flesh around him

rise like a tide to claw him down. The fist gave up beating at his testicles and seized them

instead. He screamed with pain, his clamor rising an octave as someone began to chew on

his hamstrings.

"Down!" he heard Esther screech. "Down!"

Her noose had cut off all but the last squeak of breath. Choked, crushed, and devoured, he

toppled, his head thrown back as he did so. They'd take his eyes, he knew, as soon as they

could, and that would be the end of him. Even if he was saved by some miracle, it would be

worthless if they'd taken his eyes. Unmanned, he could go on living; but not blind. His knees

struck the boards, and fingers clawed for access to his face. Knowing he had mere seconds of

sight left to him, he opened his eyes as wide as he could and stared up into the darkness

overhead, hoping to find some last lovely thing to spend them on: a beam of dusty

moonlight; a spider's web, trembling at the din he raised. But the darkness was too deep. His

eyes would be thumbed out before he could use them again.

And then, a motion in that darkness. Something unfurling, like smoke from a conch, taking

figmental shape overhead. His pain's invention, no doubt, but it sweetened his terror a little

to see a face, like that of a beatific child, pour his gaze upon him.

"Open yourself to me," he heard it say. "Give up the struggle and let me be in you."

More cliché, he thought. A dream of intercession to set against the nightmare that was

about to geld and blind him. But one was real—his pain was testament to that—so why not

the other?

"Let me into your head and heart," the infant's lips said.

"I don't know how," he yelled, his cry taken up in parody by Abelow

and the rest.

“How? How? How?” they chanted.

The child had its reply. “Give up the fight,” he said.

That wasn't so hard, Gentle thought. He'd lost it anyway. What was there left to lose? With

his eyes fixed on the child, Gentle let every muscle in his body relax. His hands gave up their

fists; his heels, their kicks. His head tipped back, mouth open. “Open your heart and head,” he

heard the infant say.

“Yes,” he replied.

Even as he uttered his invitation, a moth's—wing doubt fluttered in his ear. At the

beginning hadn't this smacked of melodrama? And didn't it still? A soul snatched from

Purgatory by cherubim; opened, at the last, to simple salvation. But his heart was wide, and

the saving child swooped upon it before doubt could seal it again. He tasted another mind in

his throat and felt its chill in his veins. The invader was as good as its word. He felt his

tormentors melt from around him, their holds and howls fading like mists.

He fell to the floor. It was dry beneath his cheek, though seconds before Esther's skirts had

been seeping on it. Nor was there any trace of the creatures' stench in the air. He rolled over

and cautiously reached to touch his hamstrings. They were intact. And his testicles, which

he'd presumed nearly pulped, didn't even ache. He laughed with relief

to find himself whole

and, while he laughed, scrabbled for the candle he'd dropped.
Delusion! It had all been

delusion! Some final rite of passage conducted by his mind so that he
might supersede his

guilt and face his future as a Reconciler unburdened. Well, the
phantoms had done their

duty. Now he was free.

His fingers had found the candle. He picked it up, fumbled for the
matches, struck one, and

put the flame to the wick. The stage he'd filled with ghouls and
cherubim was empty from

boards to gallery. He got to his feet. Though the hurts he'd felt had
been imagined, the fight

he'd put up against them had been real enough, and his body—which
was far from healed

after the brutalities of Yzordderrex— was the worse for his resistance.

As he hobbled towards the door, he heard the cherub speak again.
“Alone at last,” it said.

He turned on his heel. The voice had come from behind him, but the
staircase was empty.

So was the landing and the passageways that led off the hall. The
voice came again, however.

“Amazing, isn't it?” the putto said. “To hear and not to see. It's enough
to drive a man mad.”

Again Gentle wheeled, the candle flame fluttering at his speed.

“I'm still here,” the cherub said. “We'll be together for quite a time,
just you and I, so we'd

better get to like each other. What do you enjoy chatting about?
Politics? Food? I'm good for

anything but religion.”

This time, as he turned, Gentle caught a glimpse of his tormentor. It had put off the

cherubic illusion. What he saw resembled a small ape, its face either anemic or powdered, its

eyes black beads, its mouth enormous. Rather than waste his energies pursuing something

so nimble (it had hung from the ceiling minutes before), Gentle stood still and waited. The

tormentor was a chatterbox. It would speak again and eventually show itself entirely. He

didn't have to wait long.

“Those demons of yours must have been appalling,” it said, “The way you kicked and

cursed.”

“You didn't see them?”

“No. Nor do I want to.”

“But you've got your fingers in my head, haven't you?”

“Yes, But don't delve. It's not my business.”

“What is your business?”

“How do you live in this brain? It's so small and sweaty.”

“Your business?”

“To keep you company.”

“I'm leaving soon.”

“I don't think so. Of course, that's just my opinion....”

“Who are you?”

“Call me Little Ease.”

“That's a name?”

“My father was a jailer. Little Ease was his favorite cell. I used to say, Thank God he didn't

circumcise for a living, or I'd be—”

“Don't.”

“Just trying to keep the conversation light. You seem very agitated. There's no need. You're

not going to come to any harm, unless you defy my Maestro.”

“Sartori.”

“The very man. He knew you'd come here, you see. He said you'd pine and you'd preen, and

how very right he was. But then I'm sure he'd have done the same thing. There's nothing in

your head that isn't in his. Except for me, that is. I must thank you for being so prompt, by

the way. He said I'd have to be patient, but here you are, after less than two days. You must

have wanted these memories badly.”

The creature went on in similar vein, burbling at the back of Gentle's head, but he was

barely aware of it. He was concentrating on what to do now. This creature, whatever it was,

had tricked its way into him—Open your head and heart, it had said, and he'd done just that,

fool that he was: opened himself up to its possession—and now he had to find some way to

be rid of it.

“There's more where those came from, you know,” it was saying.

He'd temporarily lost track of its monologue and didn't know what it was prattling about.

"More of what?" he said.

"More memories," it replied. "You wanted the past, but you've only had a tiny part of a tiny

part. The best's still to come."

"I don't want it," he said.

"Why not? It's you, Maestro, in all your many skins. You should have what's yours. Or are

you afraid you'll drown in what you've been?"

He didn't answer. It knew damn well how much damage the past could do if it came over

him too suddenly; he'd laid plans for that very eventuality as he'd come to the house.

Little Ease must have heard his pulse quicken, because it said, "I can see why it'd frighten

you. There's so much to be guilty for, isn't there? Always, so much."

He had to be out and away, he thought. Staying here, where the past was all too present,

invited disaster.

"Where are you going?" Little Ease said as Gentle started towards the door.

"I'd like to get some sleep," he said. An innocent enough request.

"You can sleep here," his possessor replied.

"There's no bed."

"Then lie down on the floor. I'll sing a lullaby."

"And there's nothing to eat or drink."

"You don't need sustenance right now," came the reply.

“I'm hungry.”

“So fast for a while.”

Why was it so eager to keep him here? he wondered. Did it simply want to wear him down

with sleeplessness and thirst before he even stepped outside? Or did its sphere of influence

cease at the threshold? That hope leapt in him, but he tried not to let it show. He sensed that

the creature, though it had spoken of entering his head and heart, did not have access to

every thought in his cranium. If it did, it'd have no need of threats in order to keep him here.

It would simply direct his limbs to be leaden and drop him to the ground. His intentions

were still his own, even if the entity had his memories at its behest, and it followed

therefore that he might get to the door, if he was quick, and be beyond its grasp before it

opened the floodgates. In order to placate it until he was ready to make his move, he turned

his back on the door.

“Then I suppose I stay,” he said.

“At least we've got each other for company,” Little Ease said. “Though let me make it clear,

I draw the line at any carnal relations, however desperate you get. Please don't take it

personally. It's just that I know your reputation, and I want to state here and now I have no

interest in sex.”

“Will you never have children?”

“Oh, yes, but that's different. I lay them in the heads of my enemies.”

“Is that a warning?” he asked.

“Not at all,” it replied. “I'm sure you could accommodate a family of us. It's all One, after all.

Isn't that right?” It left off its voice for a moment and imitated him perfectly. “We'll not be

subsumed at our deaths, Roxborough, we'll be increased to the size of Creation. Think of me

as a little sign of that increase, and we'll get along fine.”

“Until you murder me.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because Sartori wants me dead.”

“You do him an injustice,” Little Ease said. “I've no brief as an assassin. All he wants me to

do is keep you from your work until after midsummer. He doesn't want you playing the

Reconciler and letting his enemies into the Fifth. Who can blame him? He intends to build a

New Yzordderrex here, to rule over the Fifth from pole to pole. Did you know that?”

“He did mention it.”

“And when that's done, I'm sure he'll embrace you as a brother.”

“But until then—”

”—I have his permission to do whatever I must to keep you from being a Reconciler. And if

that means driving you insane with memories—”

”—then you will.”

“Must, Maestro, must. I'm a dutiful creature.”

Keep talking, Gentle thought, as if waxed poetic describing its powers of subservience. He

wouldn't make for the door, he'd decided. It was probably double- or treble-locked. Better

that he went for the window by which he'd entered. He'd fling himself through if need be. If

he broke a few bones in the process, it'd be a small price to pay for escape.

He glanced around casually, as if deciding where he was going to lay his head, never once

allowing his eyes to stray to the front door. The room with the open window lay ten paces at

most from where he stood. Once inside, there'd be another ten to reach the window. Little

Ease, meanwhile, was lost in loops of its own humility. Now was as good a time as any.

He took a pace towards the bottom of the stairs as a feint, then changed direction and

darted for the door. He'd made three paces before it even realized what he was up to.

“Don't be so stupid!” it snapped.

He'd been conservative in his calculation, he realized. He'd be through the door in eight

paces, not ten, and across the room in another six.

“I'm warning you,” it shrieked, then, realizing its appeals would gain it nothing, acted.

Within a pace of the door, Gentle felt something open in his head. The crack through which

he allowed the past to trickle suddenly gaped. In a pace the rivulet was a stream; in two,

white waters; in three, a flood. He saw the window across the room,
and the street outside,

but his will to reach it was washed away in the deluge of the past.

He'd lived nineteen lives between his years as Sartori and his time as
John Furie Zacharias,

his unconscious programmed by Pie to ease him out of one life and
into another in a fog of

self-ignorance that only lifted when the deed was done, and he awoke
in a strange city, with

a name filched from a telephone book or a conversation. He'd left pain
behind him, of course,

wherever he'd gone. Though he'd always been careful to detach
himself from his circle, and

cover his tracks when he departed, his sudden disappearances had
undoubtedly caus ed

great grief to everyone who'd held him in their affections. The only
one who'd escaped

unscathed had been himself. Until now. Now all these lives were upon
him at once, and the

hurts he'd scrupulously avoided caught up with him. His head filled
with fra gments of his

past, pieces of the nineteen unfinished stories that he'd left behind, all
lived with the same

infantile greed for sensation that had marked his existence as John
Furie Zacharias. In every

one of these lives he'd had the comfort of adoration. He'd been loved
and lionized: for his

charm, for his profile, for his mystery. But that fact didn't sweeten the
flood of memories.

Nor did it save him from the panic he felt as the little self he knew

and understood was

overwhelmed by the sheer profusion of details that arose from the other histories.

For two centuries he'd never had to ask the questions that vexed every other soul at some

midnight or other: "Who am I? What was I made for, and what will I be when I die?"

Now he had too many answers, and that was more distressing than too few. He had a small

tribe of selves, put on and off like masks. He had trivial purposes aplenty. But there had

never been enough years held in his memory at one time to make him plumb the depths of

regret or remorse, and he was the poorer for that. Nor, of course, had there been the

imminence of death or the hard wisdom of mourning. Forgetfulness had always been on

hand to smooth his frowns away, and it had left his spirit unproved.

Just as he'd feared, the assault of sights and scenes was too much to bear, and though he

fought to hold on to some sense of the man he'd been when he'd entered the house, it was

rapidly subsumed. Halfway between the door and the window his desire to escape, which

had been rooted in the need to protect himself, went out of him. The determination fell from

his face, as though it were just another mask. Nothing replaced it. He stood in the middle of

the room like a stoic sentinel, with no flicker of his inner turmoil rising to disturb the placid

symmetry of his face.

The night hours crawled on, marked by a bell in a distant steeple, but if he heard it he

showed no sign. It wasn't until the first light of day crept over Gamut Street, slipping

through the window he'd been so desperate to reach, that the world outside his confounded

head drew any response from him. He wept. Not for himself, but rather for the delicacy of

this amber light falling in soft pools on the hard floor. Seeing it, he conceived the vague

notion of stepping out into the street and looking for the source of this miracle, but there

was somebody in his head, its voice stronger than the muck of confusion that swilled there,

who wanted him to answer a question before it would allow him out to play. It was a simple

enough inquiry.

"Who are you?" it wanted to know.

The answer was difficult. He had a lot of names in his head, and pieces of lives to go with

them, but which one of them was his? He'd have to sort through many fragments to get a

sense of himself, and that was too wretched a task on a day like this, when there were

sunbeams at the window, inviting him out to spy their father in Heaven.

"Who are you?" the voice asked him again, and he was obliged to tell the simple truth.

"I don't know."

The questioner seemed content with this. "You may as well go, then," it said. "But I'd like

you to come back once in a while, just to see me. Will you do that?"

He said that of course he would, and the voice replied that he was free to go. His legs were

stiff, and when he tried to walk he fell instead, and had to crawl to where the sun was

brightening the boards. He played there for a time and then, feeling stronger, climbed out of

the window into the street.

Had he possessed a cogent memory of the previous night's pursuits he'd have realized, as

he jumped down onto the pavement, that his guess concerning Sartori's agent had been

correct, and its jurisdiction did indeed halt at the limits of the house. But he comprehended

not at all the fact of his escape. He'd entered number 28 the previous night as a man of

purpose, the Reconciler of the Imajica come to confront the past and be strengthened by

self-knowledge. He left it undone by that same knowledge and stood in the street like a

bedlamite, staring up at the sun in ignorance of the fact that its arc marked the year's

progression to midsummer, and thus to the hour when the man of purpose he'd been had to

act—or fail forever.

Although Jude had not slept well after Clem's visit (dreams of light bulbs, talking in a code

of flickers she couldn't crack), she woke early and had laid her plans for the day by eight.

She'd drive up to Highgate, she decided, and try and find some way into the prison beneath

the tower, where the only woman left in the Fifth who might help empower her languished.

She knew more about Celestine now than she had when she'd first visited the tower on New

Year's Eve. Dowd had procured her for the Unbeheld, or so he claimed, plucking her from the

streets of London and taking her to the borders of the First. That she'd survived such

traumas at all was extraordinary. That she might be sane at the end of them, after divine

violation and centuries of imprisonment, was almost certainly too much to hope for. But

mad or not, Celestine was a much needed source of insight, and Jude was determined to dare

whatever she had to in order to hear the woman speak.

The tower was so perfectly anonymous she drove past it before realizing that she'd done

so.. Doubling back, she parked in a side street and approached on foot. There were no

vehicles in the forecourt and no sign of life at any of the windows, but she marched to the

front door and rang the bell, hoping there might be a caretaker she could persuade to let her

in. She'd use Oscar's name as a reference, she decided. Though she knew this was playin g

with fire, there was no time for niceties. Whether Gentle's ambitions as a Reconciler were

realized or not, the days ahead would be charged with possibilities. Things sealed were

cracking; things silent were drawing breath to speak.

The door remained closed, though she rang and rapped several times. Frustrated, she

headed around the back of the building, the route more choked by barbs and stings than

ever. The tower's shadow chilled the ground where Clara had dropped and died, and the

earth, which was badly drained, smelled of stagnancy. Until she walked here the thought of

finding any fragments of the blue eye had not occurred to her, but perhaps it had been part

of her unconscious agenda from the start. Finding no hope of access on this side of the

building, she turned her attention to seeking the pieces. Though her recollections of what

had happened here were strong, she couldn't pinpoint with any accuracy the place where

Dowd's mites had devoured the stone, and she wandered around for fully an hour, searching

through the long grass for some sign. Her patience was finally rewarded, however. Much

farther from the tower than she'd ever have guessed, she found what the devourers had left.

It was little more than a pebble, which anybody but herself would have passed over. But to

her eyes its blue was unmistakable, and when she knelt to pick it up she was almost

reverential. It looked like an egg, she thought, lying there in a nest of grass, waiting for the

warmth of a body to kindle the life in it.

As she stood up she heard the sound of car doors slamming on the other side of the

building. Keeping the stone in her hand she slipped back down the side of the tower. There

were voices in the forecourt: men and women exchanging words of welcome. At the corner,

she had a glimpse of them. Here they were, the Tabula Rasa. In her imagination she'd

elevated them to the dubious status of Grand Inquisitors, austere and merciless judges

whose cruelty would be gouged into their faces. There was perhaps one among this

quartet—the eldest of the three men—who would not have looked absurd in robes, but the

others had an insipidity about their features and a sloth in their bearing that would have

made them bathetic in any garb but the most bland. None looked particularly happy with his

lot. To judge by their leaden eyes, sleep had failed to befriend them lately. Nor could their

expensive clothes (everything charcoal and black) conceal the lethargy in their limbs.

She waited at the corner until they'd disappeared through the front door, hoping the last

had left it ajar. But it was once again locked, and this time she declined to knock. While she

might have brazened or flattered her way past a caretaker, none of the quartet she'd seen

would have spared her an inch. As she stepped away from the door another car turned off

the road and glided into the forecourt. Its driver was a male, and the youngest of the

arrivees. It was too late to dodge for cover, so she raised her hand in a cheery way and

picked up her pace to a smart trot.

As she came abreast of the vehicle it halted. She kept on walking. Once past it, she heard

the car door open and a fruity, overeducated voice said, "You there! What are you doing?"

She kept up her trot, resisting the temptation to run even though she heard his feet on the

gravel, then another haughty holler as he came in pursuit. She ignored him until she was at

the property line and he was within grasping distance of her. Then she turned, with a pretty

smile, and said, "Did you call?"

"This is a private ground," he replied.

"I'm sorry, I must have the wrong address. You're not a gynecologist, are you?" Where this

invention sprang from she didn't know, but it colored his cheeks in two pulses. "I need to see

a doctor as soon as possible."

He shook his head, covered in confusion. "This isn't the hospital," he

spluttered. "It's

halfway down the hill."

Lord bless the English male, she thought, who could be reduced to near idiocy at the very

mention of matters vaginal.

"Are you sure you're not a doctor?" she said, enjoying his discomfiture. "Even a student? I

don't mind."

He actually took a step back from her at this, as though she was going to pounce on him

and demand an examination on the spot.

"No, I'm—I'm sorry."

"So am I," she said, extending her hand. He was too baffled to refuse, and shook it. "I'm

Sister Concupiscentia," she said.

"Bloxham," he replied.

"You should be a gynecologist," she said appreciatively. "You've got lovely warm hands."

And with that she left him to his blushes.

There was a message from Chester Klein on the answering machine when she got back,

inviting her to a cocktail party at his house that evening, in celebration of what he called the

Bastard Boy's return to the land of the living. She was at first startled that Gentle had

decided to make contact with his friends after all his talk of invisibility, then flattered that

he'd taken her advice. Perhaps she'd been over-hasty in her rejection of him. Even in the

short time she'd spent in Yzordderrex, the city had made her think and behave in ways she'd

never have countenanced in the Fifth. How much more so for Gentle, whose catalogue of

adventures in the Dominions would have filled a dozen diaries. Now he was back in the Fifth,

perhaps he was resisting some of those bizarrer influences, like a man returned to

civilization from some lost tribe, sluicing off the war paint and learning to wear shoes again.

She called Klein back and accepted the invitation.

"My dear child, you are a sight for sore eyes," he said when she appeared on his doorstep

that evening. "So stylishly unnourished! Malnutrition a la mode. Perfection."

She hadn't seen him in a long time, but she didn't remember his ever being so fulsome in

his flattery before. He kissed her on both cheeks and led her through the house into the back

garden. There was still warmth in the descending sun, and his other guests—two of whom

she knew, two of whom were strangers—were sipping cocktails on the lawn. Though small

and high-walled, the garden was almost tropically lush. Inevitably, given Klein's nature, it

was entirely given over to flowering species, no bush or plant welcomed if it didn't bloom

with immoderate abandon. He introduced her to the company one by one, starting with

Vanessa, whose face—though much changed since they'd last met—was one of the two she

knew. She had put on a good deal of weight and even more makeup, as though to cover one

excess with another. Her eyes, Jude saw when she said hello, were those of a woman who

was only holding back a scream for decorum's sake.

"Is Gentle with you?" was Vanessa's first question. "No, he's not," Klein said. "Now have

another drink and go and dally in the rosebushes."

The woman took no offense at his condescension but made straight for the champagne

bottle, while Klein introduced Jude to the two strangers in the party. One, a balding young

man in sunglasses, he introduced as Duncan Skeet.

"A painter," he said. "Or, more precisely, an impressionist. Isn't that right, Duncan? You do

impressions, don't you? Modigliani, Corot, Gauguin...."

The joke was lost on its butt, though not on Jude. "Isn't that illegal?" she said.

"Only if you don't talk about it," Klein replied, which remark brought a guffaw from the

fellow in conversation with the faker, a heavily mustached and accented individual called

Luis.

"Who's not a painter of any persuasion. You're not anything at all, are you, Luis?"

"How about a Lotos-eater?" Luis said. The scent Jude had taken to be that of the blossoms

in the borders was in fact Luis' aftershave.

"I'll drink to that," Klein said, moving Jude on to the last of the company. Though Jude

knew the woman's face she couldn't place it, until Klein named her-Simone-and she

remembered the conversation she'd had at Clem and Taylor's, which had ended with this

woman heading off in search of seduction. Klein left them to talk while he went inside to

break open another bottle of champagne.

"We met at Christmas," Simone said. "I don't know if you remember?"

"Instantly," Jude said.

"I've had my hair chopped since then, and I swear half my friends don't recognize me."

"It suits you."

"Klein says I should have kept it and had it made into jewelry. Apparently hair brooches

were the height of fashion at the turn of the century."

"Only as memento mori," Jude said. Simone looked blank. "The hair was usually from

someone who'd died."

The woman's fizz-addled features still took a little time to register what she was being

told, but when she grasped the point she let out a groan of disgust.

"I suppose that's his idea of a joke," she said. "He has no sense of fucking decency, that

man." Klein was appearing from the back door, bearing champagne. "Yes, you!" Simone said.

"Don't you take death seriously?"

"Have I missed something?" Klein said.

“You are a tasteless old fart sometimes!” Simone went on, striding toward him and

throwing the glass down at his feet.

“What did I do?” Klein said.

Luis went to his assistance, cooing at Simone to calm her. Jude had no desire to get further

embroiled. She retreated down one of the paths, her hand slipping into the deep pocket of

her skirt, where the egg of the blue eye was lying. She closed her palm around it and stooped

to sniff at one of the perfect roses. It had no scent, not even of life. She thumbed its petals.

They were dry. She stood up again, casting her eyes over the spectacle of blossoms. Fake,

every last one.

Simone's caterwauling had ceased behind her, and now so did Luis' chatter. Jude looked

around, and there at the back door, stepping out of the house into the warm evening light,

was Gentle.

“Save me,” she heard Klein imploring. “Before I'm flayed alive,”

Gentle smiled his sun-shamer and opened his arms to Klein.

“No more arguments,” he said, hugging the man. “Tell Simone,” Klein replied. “Simone. Are

you bullying Chester?” “He was being a bastard.”

“No, I'm the bastard. Give me a kiss, and tell me you forgive him.”

“I forgive him.”

“Peace on earth, goodwill to Chester.”

There was laughter from all parties, and Gentle passed through the company with kisses,

hugs, and handshakes, reserving the longest, and perhaps the crudest, embrace for Vanessa.

"You're missing somebody," Klein said, and steered Gentle's glance towards Jude.

He didn't lavish his smile upon her. She was wise to his devices, and he knew it. Instead he

offered her an almost apologetic look and raised the glass Klein had already put in his hand

in her direction. He'd always been a slick transformer (perhaps it was the Maestro in him,

surfacing as a trivial skill), and in the twenty-four hours or so since she'd left him on his

doorstep he'd made himself new. The ragged locks were trimmed, the grimy face washed

and shaved. Dressed in white, he looked like a cricketer returned from the crease, glowing

with vigor and victory. She stared at him, searching for some sign of the haunted man he'd

been the evening before, but he'd put his anxieties entirely out of sight, for which she could

only admire him. More than admire. Tonight he was the lover she'd imagined as she'd lain in

Quaisoir's bed, and she couldn't help but be stirred by the sight of him. Once before a dream

had led her into his arms, and the consequence, of course, had been pain and tears. It was a

form of masochism to invite a repeat of that experience, and a distraction from weightier

matters.

And yet; and yet. Was it perhaps inevitable that they found their way back into one

another's arms sooner or later? And if it was, maybe this game of glances was a greater

distraction still, and they would serve their ambitions better to dispense with the dalliance

and accept that they were indivisible. This time, instead of being dogged by a past neither of

them had comprehended, they knew their histories and could build on solid ground. That is,

if he had the will to do so.

Klein was beckoning her, but she stayed in her bower of fake blossoms, seeing how eager

he was to watch the drama he'd engineered unfold. He, Luis, and Duncan were merely

spectators. The scene they'd come to watch was the Judgment of Paris, with Vanessa,

Simone, and herself cast as the Goddesses, and Gentle as the hero obliged to choose between

them. It was grotesque, and she was determined to keep herself from the tableau, instead

wandering up to the far end of the garden while the banter continued on the lawn. Close to

the wall she came upon a strange sight. A clearing had been made in the artificial jungle, and

a small rosebush—real, but far less sumptuous than the fakery surrounding it—had been

planted there. As she was puzzling over this, Luis appeared at her side with a glass of

champagne.

“One of his cats,” Luis said. “Gloriana. She was killed by a car in March. He was devastated.

Couldn't sleep. Wouldn't even talk to anybody. I thought he was going to kill himself.”

“He's a strange one,” Jude said, casting a glance back at Klein, who had his arm around

Gentle's shoulder and was laughing uproariously. “He pretends everything's a game—”

“That's because he feels everything too much,” Luis replied.

“I doubt that,” she said.

“I've been in business with him twenty-one, twenty-two years. We have fights. We make

up. We have fights again. He's a good man, believe me. But so afraid of feeling, he must make

it all a joke. You're not English, huh?”

“No, I'm English.”

“Then you understand this,” he said. “You also have the little graves, hidden away.” He

laughed.

“Thousands,” she said, watching Gentle step back into the house.

“Would you excuse me a

moment?” she said, and headed back down the garden with Luis in pursuit.

Klein made a move to intercept her, but she simply handed him her empty glass and went

inside. Gentle was in the kitchen, rooting through the refrigerator, peeling the lids off bowls

and peering into them.

“So much for invisibility,” Jude said.

“Would you have preferred it if I hadn't come?”

“Meaning that if I'd asked you'd have stayed away?”

He grinned as he found something that suited his palate. “Meaning,” he said, “that the rest

of them don't have a prayer. I came because I knew you'd be here.”

He plunged his first and middle fingers into the ramekin he'd brought out and laid a dollop

of chocolate mousse on his tongue.

“Want some?” he said.

She hadn't, until she saw the abandon with which he was devouring the stuff. His appetite

was contagious. She scooped a fingerful herself. It was sweet and creamy.

“Good?” he said.

“Sinful,” she replied. “What made you change your mind?”

“About what?”

“About hiding yourself away.”

“Life's too short,” he said, taking his laden fingers to his mouth again.

“Besides, I just said: I

knew you'd be here.”

“You're a mind reader now?”

“I'm flourishing,” he said, his grin more chocolate than teeth. The sophisticated she'd seen

step out into the garden minutes before was here a guzzling boy.

“You've got chocolate all around your mouth,” she said.

“Do you want to kiss it off?” he replied.

“Yes,” she said, seeing no purpose misrepresenting her feeling. Secrets had done them too

much harm in the past.

“Then why are we still here?” he said.

“Klein’ll never forgive us if we leave. The party’s in your honor.”

“They can talk about us when we’ve gone,” he said, setting down the ramekin and wiping

his mouth with the back of his hand. “In fact, they’d probably prefer that. I say we go now,

before we’re spotted. We’re wasting time making conversation—”

—when we could be making love.”

“I thought I was the mind reader,” he said.

As they opened the front door they heard Klein calling them from the back, and Jude felt a

pang of guilt, until she remembered the proprietorial look she’d caught on Klein’s face when

Gentle had first “appeared and he’d known that he had the cast gathered for a fine farce.

Guilt turned to irritation, and she slammed the front door hard to make sure he heard.

As soon as they got back to the flat Jude threw open the windows to let the breeze, which

was still balmy though the night had long since fallen, come and go. News from the streets

outside came with it, of course, but nothing momentous: the inevitable sirens; chatter from

the pavement; jazz from the club down the block. With the windows wide, she sat down on

the bed beside Gentle. It was time for them to speak without any other agenda but the truth.

"I didn't think we'd end up this way," she said. "Here. Together."

"Are you glad we have?"

"Yes, I'm glad," she said, after a pause. "It feels right."

"Good," he replied. "It feels perfectly natural to me too."

He slid around the back of her and, threading his hands through her hair, began to work

his fingers against her scalp. She sighed.

"You like that?" he asked.

"I like that." "Do you want to tell me how you feel?"

"About what?"

"About me. About us."

"I told you, it feels right."

"That's all?"

"No."

"What else?"

She closed her eyes, the persuasive fingers almost easing the words out of her. "I'm glad

you're here because I think we can learn from one another. Maybe even love each other

again. How does that sound?"

"Fine by me," he said softly.

"And what about you? What's in your head?"

"That I'd forgotten how strange this Dominion is. That I need your help to make me strong.

That I'm afraid I may act strangely sometimes, make mistakes, and I want you to love me

enough to forgive me if I do. Will you?"

"You know I will," she said.

"I want you to share my visions, Judith. I want you to see what's shining in me and not be

afraid of it."

"I'm not afraid."

"That's good to hear," he said. "That's so very good." He leaned towards her, putting his

mouth close to her ear. "We make the rules from now on," he whispered. "And the world

follows. Yes? There's no law but us. What we want. What we feel. We'll let that consume us,

and the fire'll spread. You'll see."

He kissed the ear into which he'd poured these seductions, then her cheek, and finally her

mouth. She started to kiss him back, fervently, putting her hands around his head as he had

hers, kneading the flesh from which his hair sprang and feeling its motion against his skull.

He had his hands on the neck of her blouse, but he didn't bother to unbutton it. Instead he

tore it open, not in a frenzy but rhythmically, rent after rent, like a ritual of uncovering. As

soon as her breasts were bare his mouth was on them. Her skin was hot, but his tongue was

hotter, painting her with spiral tracks of spittle, then closing his mouth around her nipples

until they were harder than the tongue that teased them. His hands were reducing her skirt

to tatters in the same efficient way he'd torn open her blouse. She let

herself drop back onto

the bed, with the rags of blouse and skirt beneath her. He looked down at her, laying his

palm at her crotch, which was still protected from his touch by the thin fabric of her

underwear.

“How many men have had this?” he asked her, the question murmured without inflection.

His head was silhouetted against the pale billows at the window, and she could not read his

expression. “How many?” he said, moving the ball of his hand in a circular motion. From any

other source but this the question would have offended or even enraged her. But she liked

his curiosity.

“A few.”

He ran his fingers down into the space between her legs and worked his middle fingers

under the fabric to touch her other hole. “And this?” he said, pushing at the place.

She was less comfortable with this inquiry, verbal or digital, but he insisted. “Tell me,” he

said. “Who's been in here?”

“Just one,” she said.

“Godolphin?” he replied.

“Yes.”

He removed his finger and rose from the bed. “A family enthusiasm,” he remarked.

“Where are you going?”

“Just closing the curtains,” he said. “The dark's better for what we're going to do.” He drew

the drapes without closing the window. “Are you wearing any jewelry?” he asked her.

“Just my earrings.”

“Take them off,” he said.

“Can't we have a little light?”

“It's too bright as it is,” he replied, though she could barely see him. He was watching her

as he undressed, that much she knew. He saw her slide her earrings from the holes in her

lobes and then take off her underwear. By the time she was completely naked so was he.

“I don't want a little part of you,” he said, approaching the bottom of the bed. “I want all of

you, every last piece, and I want you to want all of me.”

“I do,” she said.

“I hope you mean that.”

“How can I prove it?”

His gray form seemed to darken as she spoke, receding into the shadows of the room. He'd

said he'd be invisible, and now he was. Though she felt his hand graze her ankle, and looked

down the bed to find him, he was beyond the grasp of her eye. But pleasure flowed from his

touch nevertheless.

“I want this,” he said as he caressed her foot. “And this.” Now her shin and thigh. “And

this”—her sex—“as much as the rest, but no more. And this, and

these." Belly, breasts. His

touch was on them all, so he had to be very close to her now, but still invisible, "And this

sweet throat, and this wonderful head," Now the hands slid away again, down her arms.

"And these" he said, "to the ends of your fingers."

The touch was back at her foot again, but everywhere his hands had been—which was to

say her entire body—trembled with anticipation at the touch coming again. She raised her

head from the pillow a second time in the hope of glimpsing her lover.

"Lie back," he told her.

"I want to see you."

"I'm here," he said, his eyes stealing a gleam from somewhere as he spoke: two bright dots

in a space that, had she not known it was bounded, could have been limitless. After his

words, there was only his breath. She couldn't help but let the rhythm of her own

inhalations and exhalations fall in with his, a lulling regularity which steadily slowed.

After a time, he raised her foot to his mouth and licked the sole from heel to toe in one

motion. Then his breath again, cooling the fluid he'd bathed her with, and slowing still

further as it came and went, until her system seemed to teeter on termination at the end of

each breath, only to be coaxed back into life again as she inhaled. This was the substance of

every moment, she realized: the body—never certain if the next
lungful would be its last—

hovering for a tiny time between cessation and continuance. And in
that space out of time,

between a breath expelled and another drawn, the miraculous was
easy, because neither

flesh nor reason had laid their edicts there. She felt his mouth open
wide enough to

encompass her toes and then, impossible as it was, slide her foot into
his throat.

He's going to swallow me, she thought, and the notion conjured once
again the book she'd

found in Estabrook's study, with its sequence of lovers enclosed in a
circle of consumption : a

devouring so prodigious it had ended with mutual eclipse. She felt no
unease at the

prospect. This wasn't the business of the visible world, where fear got
fat because there was

so much to win and lose. This was a place for lovers, where there was
only ever gain.

She felt him draw her other leg up to his head and immerse it in the
same heat; then felt

him take hold of her hips and use them as purchase to impale himself
upon her, inch by inch.

Perhaps he'd become vast: his maw monstrous, his throat a tunnel; or
perhaps she was

pliant as silk, and he was drawing her into him like a magician
threading fake flowers into a

wand. She reached up towards him in the darkness, to feel the
miracle, but her fingers

couldn't interpret what buzzed beneath them. Was this her flesh or
his? Ankle or cheek?

There was no way of knowing. Nor, in truth, any need to know. All she wanted now was to

do as the lovers in the book had done and match his devouring with her own.

She reached for the edge of the bed and turned herself half over, bringing him down beside

her. Now, though her eyes were besotted by darkness, she saw the outline of his body,

folded into the shadows of her own. There was nothing changed about his anatomy. Though

he was consuming her, his body was in no way distorted. He lay beside her like a sleeper.

She reached out to touch him a second time, not expecting to make sense of his body now

but finding she could. This was his thigh; this his shin; this his ankle and foot. As she ran her

palm across his flesh a delicate wave of change came with it, and his substance seemed to

soften beneath her touch. The scent of his sweat was appetizing. It, quickened the juices in

her throat and belly. She drew her head towards his feet and touched her lips to the

substance of him. Then she was feeding; spreading her hunger around him like a mouth and

closing her mind on his glistening skin. He shuddered as she took him in, and she felt the

thrill of his pleasure as her own. He had already consumed her to the hips, but she quickly

matched his appetite, taking his legs down into her, swallowing both his prick and the belly

it lay hard against. She loved the excess of this, and its absurdity, their bodies defying

physics and physique, or else making fresh proofs of both as the configuration closed upon

itself. Was anything ever so easy and yet so impossible, besides love? And what was this, if

not that paradox laid on a sheet? He had slowed his swallows to allow her to catch up, and

now, in tandem, they closed the loop of their consumption, until their bodies were figments,

and they were mouth to mouth.

Something from outside—a shout in the street, a sour saxophone chord—threw her back

into the plausible world again, and she saw the root from which their invention had

flowered. It was a commonplace conjunction: her legs crossed around his hips, his erection

high inside her. She couldn't see his face, but she knew he wasn't here in this fugitive place

with her. He was still dreaming their devouring. She panicked, wanted to regain the vision

but not knowing how. She tightened her grip on his body and, in so doing, inspired his hips

to motion. He began to move in her, breathing oh so slowly against her face. She forgot her

panic and let her rhythm once again slow until it matched his. The solid world dissolved as

she did so, and she returned to the place from which she'd been called to find that the loop

was tightening by the moment, his mind enveloping her head as she enveloped his, like

layers of an impossible onion, each one smaller than the layer it concealed: an enigma that

could only exist where substance collapsed into the very mind which begged its being.

This bliss could not be sustained indefinitely, however. Before long it began once more to

lose its purity, tainted by further sounds from the outside world, and this time she sensed

that he was also relinquishing his hold on the delirium. Perhaps, as they learned to be lovers

again, they'd find a way to sustain the state for longer: spend nights and days, perhaps, lost

in the precious space between a breath expelled and another drawn. But for now she would

have to be content with the ecstasy they'd had. Reluctantly, she let the tropic night in which

they'd devoured each other be subsumed into a simpler darkness, and, without quite

knowing where consciousness began and ended, she fell asleep.

When she awoke she was alone in the bed. That disappointment apart, she felt both lively

and light. What they'd shared was a commodity more marketable than a cure for the

common cold: a high without a hangover. She sat up, reaching for a sheet to drape around

her, but before she could stand she heard his voice in the predawn gloom. He was standing

by the window, with a fold of curtain clipped between middle and forefinger, his eye to the

chink he'd opened.

"It's time for me to get working," he said softly.

“It's still early,” she said.

“The sun's almost up,” he replied. “I can't waste time.”

He let the curtain drop and crossed to the bed. She sat up and put her arms around his

torso. She wanted to spend time with him, luxuriating in the calm she felt, but his instinct

was healthier. They both had work to do.

“I'd rather stay here than return to the studio,” he said. “Would you mind?”

“Not at all,” she replied. “In fact, I'd like you to stay.”

“I'll be coming and going at odd hours.”

“As long as you find your way back into bed once in a while,” she said.

“I'll be with you,” he said, running his hand down from her neck to rub her belly. “From

now on, I'll be with you night and day.”

Though Jude's memory of the night before was vivid, she had no recollection of either

herself or Gentle taking the telephone off the hook, and it wasn't until nine -thirty the

following morning, when she decided to call Clem, that she realized that one of them had

done so. She replaced the receiver, only to have the telephone ring seconds later. At the

other end of the line was a voice she'd almost given up expecting to hear again: Oscar. At

first she thought he was breathless, but after a few stumbling sentences she realized his

pantings were barely suppressed sobs.

"Where have you been, my darling? I've rung and rung since I got your note. I thought you

were dead."

"The phone was off the hook, that's all. Where are you?"

"At the house. Will you come? Please. I need you here!" He spoke with escalating panic, as

though she were punctuating his appeals with refusals. "We don't have much time."

"Of course I'll come," she told him.

"Now," he insisted. "You've got to come now."

She told him she'd be on his doorstep within the hour, and he replied that she'd find him

waiting. Putting off her call to Clem and putting on a little makeup, she headed out. Though

it wasn't yet midmorning the sun was blazing hot, and as she drove she remembered the

monologue that she and Gentle had been treated to on their ride back from the estate.

Monsoons and heat waves all through the summer, the doomsayer had predicted; and how

he'd relished his prophecies! She'd thought his enthusiasm grotesque at the time, a petty

mind indulging in apocalyptic fantasies. But now, after the extraordinary night she'd had

with Gentle, she found herself wondering how these bright streets might be made to

experience the miracles of the previous midnight: sluiced of vehicles by an almighty rain,

then softened in the blaze of sun, so that solid matter flowed like warm treacle and a city

divided into public places and private, into wealthy ghettos and gutters, became a

continuum. Was this what Gentle had meant when he'd talked about her sharing his vision?

If so, she was ready for more.

Regent's Park Road was quieter than usual. There were no kids playing on the pavement

and, though she'd had a hellish time carving her way through the traffic just two streets

away, no vehicles parked within half a mile of the house. It stood shunned, but for her. She

didn't need to knock. Before she'd even set her heel on the step the door was opening, and

there was Oscar, looking harried, beckoning her in. He answered the

door dry-eyed, but as

soon as it was closed and locked and bolted, he put his arms around her and the tears began,

great sobs that racked his bulk. Over and over he told her how much he loved her, missed

her, and needed her, now more than ever. She embraced him and calmed him as best she

could. After a time he controlled himself and ushered her through to the kitchen. The lights

were burning throughout the house, but after the blaze of the day their contribution looked

jaundiced and didn't flatter him. His face was pale, where it wasn't discolored with bruises;

his hands were puffed and raw. There were other wounds, she guessed, beneath his

unpressed clothes. Watching him brew Earl Grey for them, she saw a look of discomfort

cross his face when he moved too fast. Their talk, of course, rapidly turned to their parting

at the Retreat.

"I was certain Dowd would slit your throat as soon as you got to Yzordderrex."

"He didn't lay a finger on me," she said. Then added, "That's not quite true. He did later.

But when we arrived he was too badly hurt." She paused. "So are you."

"I was in a pretty wretched state," he said. "I wanted to follow you, but I could barely

stand. I came back here, got a gun, licked my wounds awhile, then crossed over. But by that

time you'd gone."

“So you did follow?”

“Of course. Did you think I'd leave you in Yzordderrex?”

He set a large cup of tea in front of her, and honey to sweeten it with. She didn't usually

indulge, but she hadn't breakfasted, so she put enough spoonfuls of honey into the tea to

turn it into an aromatic syrup.

“By the time I reached Peccable's house,” Oscar went on, “it was empty. There were riots

going on outside. I didn't know where to start looking for you. It was a nightmare.”

“You know the Autarch was deposed?”

“No, I didn't, but I'm not surprised. Every New Year, Peccable would say, He'll go this year,

he'll go this year. What happened to Dowd, by the way?”

“He's dead,” she said, with a little smile of satisfaction.

“Are you sure? His type is difficult to kill, my dear, let me tell you. I speak from bitter

experience.”

“You were saying—”

“Yes. What was I saying?”

“That you followed us and found Peccable's house empty.”

“And half the city in flames.” He sighed. “It was tragic, seeing it like that. All that mindless

destruction. The revenge of the proles. Oh, I know, I should be celebrating a victory for

democracy, but what's going to be left? My lovely Yzordderrex: rubble. I looked at it and I

said, This is the end of an era, Oscar. After this, everything'll be different. Darker." He looked

up from the tea into which he'd been staring. "Did Peccable survive, do you know?"

"He was going to leave with Hoi-Poltoi. I assume he did. He emptied the cellar."

"No, that was me. And I'm glad I did it."

He cast a glance towards the windowsill. Nestling among the domestic bric-a-brac were a

series of diminutive figurines. Talismans, she guessed: part of the horde from Peccable's

cellar. Some were looking into the room, others out. They were all little paradigms of

aggression, with positively rabid expressions on their garishly painted faces.

"But you're my best protection," he said. "Just having you here, I feel we've got some

chance of surviving this mess." He put his hand over hers. "When I got your note and knew

you'd survived, I began to hope a little. Then of course I couldn't get hold of you, and I began

to imagine the worst."

She looked up from his hand and saw on his plagued face a family resemblance she'd never

glimpsed before. There was an echo of Charlie in him, the Charlie of the Hampstead hospice,

sitting at his window talking about bodies being dug up in the rain.

"Why didn't you just come to the flat?" she said.

"I couldn't leave here."

"Are you that badly hurt?"

“It's not what's in here that held me back,” he said, putting his hand to his chest. “It's

what's out there.”

“You still think the Tabula Rasa's going to come after you?”

“God, no. They're the least of our worries. I half thought of warning one or two of them:

anonymously, you know. Not Shales or McGann, or that idiot Bloxham. They can fry in Hell.

But Lionel was always friendly, even when he was sober. And the ladies. I don't like the idea

of their deaths on my conscience.”

“So who are you hiding from?”

“The fact is, I don't know,” he admitted. “I see images in the bowl, and I can't quite make

them out.”

She'd forgotten the Boston Bowl, with its blur of prophetic stones. Now Oscar was

apparently hanging on its every rattle.

“Something's crossed over from the Dominions, my dear,” he said. “I'm certain of that. I

saw it coming after you. Trying to smother you....”

He looked as though tears were going to overtake him again, but she reassured him, lightly

patting his hand as though he were some addled old man.

“Nothing's going to harm me,” she said. “I've survived too much in the last few days.”

“You've never seen a power like this,” he warned her. “And neither's the Fifth.”

"If it came from the Dominions, then it's the Autarch's doing."

"You sound very certain."

"That's because I know who he is."

"You've been listening to Peccable," he said. "He's full of theories, darling, but they're not

worth a damn."

His not-so-faint condescension irritated her, and she drew her hand out from under his.

"My source is a lot more reliable than Peccable," she said.

"Oh?" He realized he'd caused offense and indulged her. "Who's that?"

"Quaisoir."

"Quaisoir? How the hell did you get to her?" His surprise seemed to be as genuine as his

humoring had been feigned.

"Don't you have any idea?" she asked him. "Didn't Dowd ever talk to you about the old

days?"

Now his expression became guarded, almost suspicious.

"Dowd served generations of Godolphins," she said. "Surely you knew that? Right back to

crazy Joshua. In fact, he was Joshua's right-hand man, if man's the word."

"I was aware of that," Oscar said softly.

"Then you knew about me too?"

He said nothing,

"Did you, Oscar?"

"I didn't debate you with Dowd, if that's what you mean."

“But you knew why you and Charlie kept me in the family?”

Now it was he who was offended; he grimaced at her vocabulary.

“That's what it was, Oscar. You and Charlie, trading me; knowing I was bound to stay with

the Godolphins. Maybe I'd wander off for a while and have a few romances, but sooner or

later I'd be back in the family.”

“We both loved you,” he said, his voice as blank as the look he now gave her. “Believe me,

neither of us understood the politics of it. We didn't care.”

“Oh really?” she said, her doubt plain.

“All I know is: I love you. It's the one certainty left in my life.”

She was tempted to sour this saccharine with chapter and verse of his family's

conspiracies against her, but what was the use? He was a fractured man, locked away in his

house for fear of what the sun might invite over his threshold. Circumstance had already

undone him. Any further work on her part would be malice, and though she didn't doubt

that there was much in him to despise—his talk of the revenge of the proles had been

particularly unattractive—she'd shared too many intimacies with him, and been too

comforted by them, to be cruel. Besides, she had something to impart that would be a harder

blow than any accusation.

“I'm not staying, Oscar,” she said. “I haven't come back here to lock

myself away."

"But it's not safe out there," he replied. "I've seen what's coming. It's in the bowl. You want

to see for yourself?" He stood up. "You'll change your mind."

He led her up the stairs to the treasure room, talking as he went.

"The bowl's got a life of its own since this power came into the Fifth. It doesn't need

anybody watching, it just goes on repeating the same images. It's panicking. It knows what's

coming, and it's panicking."

She could hear it before they even reached the door: a din like the drumming of hailstones

on sun-baked earth.

"I don't think it's wise to watch for too long," he warned. "It gets hypnotic."

So saying, he opened the door. The bowl was sitting in the middle of the floor, surrounded

by a ring of votive candles, their fat flames jumping as the air was agitated by the spectacle

they lit. The prophetic stones were moving like a swarm of enraged bees in and above the

bowl, which Oscar had been obliged to set in a small mound of earth to keep it from being

thrown over by their violence. The air smelled of what he'd called their panic: a bitter odor

mingled with the metallic tang that came before lightning. Though the motion of the stones

was reasonably contained, she hung back from the bowl lest a rogue find its way out of the

dance and strike her. At the speed they were moving, the smallest of

them could have taken

out an eye. But even from a distance, with the shelves and their treasures to distract her, the

motion of the stones was all consuming. The rest of the room, Oscar included, faded into

insignificance as the frenzy drew her in.

"It may take a little time," Oscar was saying. "But the images are there." "I see," she said.

The Retreat had already appeared in the blur, its dome half hidden behind the screen of

the copse. Its appearance was brief. The Tabula Rasa's tower took its place a moment after,

only to be superseded by a third building, quite different from the pair that had gone before,

except that it too was half concealed by foliage, in this case a single tree planted in the

pavement.

"What's that house?" she asked Oscar. "I don't know, but it comes up over and over again.

It's somewhere in London, I'm certain of that." "How can you be sure?"

The building was unremarkable: three stories, flat-fronted, and, as far as she could judge,

in a dilapidated state. It could have stood in any inner city in England or for that matter in

Europe.

"London's where the circle's going to close," Oscar replied. "It's where everything began,

and it's where everything'll end."

The remark brought echoes: of Dowd at the wall on Pale Hill, talking

about history coming

around, and of Gentle and herself, mere hours before, devouring each other into perfect ion.

“There it is again,” Oscar said.

The image of the house had briefly flickered out but now reappeared, brightly lit. There

was somebody near the step, she saw, with his arms hanging by his sides and his head back

as he stared up at the sky. The resolution of the image was not good enough for her to make

out his features. Perhaps he was just some anonymous sun worshiper, but she doubted it.

Every detail of this parade had its significance.

Now the image decayed again, and the noonday scene, with its gleaming foliage and its

pristine sky, gave way to a roiling juggernaut of smoke, all black and gray.

“Here it comes,” she heard Oscar say.

There were forms in the smoke, rising, withering, and falling as ash, but their nature defied

her interpretation. Scarcely aware of what she was doing, she took a step towards the bowl.

“Don't, darling,” Oscar said.

“What are we seeing?” she asked, ignoring his caution.

“The power,” he said. “That's what's coming into the Fifth. Or already here.”

“But that's not Sartori.”

“Sartori?” he said.

“The Autarch.”

Defying his own warning, he came to her side and again said,
“Sartori? The Maestro?”

She didn't look around at him. The juggernaut demanded her utter devotion. Much as she

hated to admit it to herself, Oscar had been right, talking of immeasurable powers. This was

no human agency at work. It was a force of stupendous scale, advancing over a landscape

she'd first thought covered by a stubble of gray grass but which she now realized was a city,

those frail stalks buildings, toppling as the power burned out their foundations and

overturned them.

No wonder Oscar was trembling behind locked doors; this was a terrible sight, and one for

which she was unprepared. However atrocious Sartori's deeds, he was just a tyrant in a long

and squalid history of tyrants, men whose fear of their own frailty made them monstrous.

But this was a horror of another order entirely, beyond curing by politics or poisonings: a

vast, unforgiving power, capable of sweeping all the Maestros and despots that had carved

their names on the face of the world away without pausing to think about it. Had Sartori

unleashed this immensity? she wondered. Was he so insane that he thought he could survive

such devastation and build his New Yzordderrex on the rubble it left behind? Or was his

lunacy profounder still? Was this juggernaut the true city of which

he'd dreamed: a

metropolis of storm and smoke that would stand to the World's End
because that was its

true name?

Now the sight was consumed by total darkness, and she let go of the
breath she'd been

holding.

"It isn't over," Oscar said, his voice close to her ear.

The darkness began to shred in several places, and through the gashes
she saw a single

figure, lying on a gray floor. It was herself: a crude representation, but
recognizable.

"I warned you," Oscar said.

The darkness this image had appeared through didn't entirely
evaporate, but lingered like

a fog, and out of it a second figure came and sank down beside her.
She knew before the

action had unraveled that Oscar had made an error, thinking this was
a prophecy of harm.

The shadow between her legs was no killer. It was Gentle, and this
scene was here, in the

bowl's report, because the Reconciler stood as a sign of hope to set
against the despair that

had come before. She heard Oscar moan as the shadow lover reached
for her, putting his

hand between her legs, then raising her foot to his mouth to begin his
devouring.

"It's killing you," Oscar said.

Watched remotely, this was a rational interpretation. But it wasn't
death, of course, it was

love. And it wasn't prophecy, it was history: the very act they'd performed the night before.

Oscar was viewing it like a child, seeing its parents make love and thinking violence was

being done in the marital bed. She was glad of his error, in a way, saving her as it did from

the problem of explaining this coupling.

She and the Reconciler were quickly intertwined, the veils of darkness attending on the act

and deepening their mingled shadows, so that the lovers became a single knot, which shrank

and shrank and finally disappeared altogether, leaving the stones to rattle on as an

abstraction.

It was a strangely intimate conclusion to the sequence. From temple, tower, and house to

the storm had been a grim progression, but from the storm to this vision of love was

altogether more optimistic: a sign, perhaps, that union could bring an end to the darkness

that had gone before.

"That's all there is," Oscar said. "It just begins again from here. Round and round."

She turned from the bowl as the din of stones, which had quieted as the love scene was

sketched, became loud again.

"You see the danger you're in?" he said.

"I think I'm just an afterthought," she said, hoping to steer him away from an analysis of

what had been depicted.

“Not to me you're not,” he replied, putting his arms around her. For all his wounds, he was

not a man to be resisted easily. “I want to protect you,” he said. “That's my duty. I see that

now. I know you've been mistreated, but I can make reparations for that. I can keep you

here, safe and sound.”

“So you think we can hole up here and Armageddon will just pass over?”

“Have you got a better idea?”

“Yes. We resist it, at all costs.”

“There's no victory to be had against the likes of that,” he said.

She could hear the stones' thunder behind her and knew they were picturing the storm

again.

“At least we've got some defenses here,” he went on. “I've got spirit guards at every door

and every window. You saw those in the kitchen? They're the tiniest.”

“All male, are they?”

“What's that got to do with it?”

“They're not going to protect you, Oscar.”

“They're all we've got.”

“Maybe they're all you've got—”

She slipped from his arms and headed for the door. He followed her out onto the landing,

demanding to know what she meant by this, and finally, inflamed by his cowardice, she

turned back to him.

“There's been a power under your nose for years.”

“What power? Where?”

“Sealed up beneath Roxborough's tower.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You don't know who she is?”

“No,” he said, angered now. “This is nonsense.”

“I've seen her, Oscar.”

“How? Nobody but the Tabula Rasa gets into the tower.”

“I could show her to you. Take you to the very place.”

She dropped her volume, studying Oscar's anxious, ruddy features as she spoke. “ I think

maybe she's some kind of Goddess. I've tried to get her out twice and failed. I need help. I

need your help.”

“It's impossible,” he replied. “The tower's a fortress, now more than ever. I tell you, this

house is the only safe place left in the city. It would be suicide for me to step out of here.”

“Then that's that,” she said, not about to debate with such timidity. She started down the

stairs, ignoring his calls for her to wait.

“You can't leave me,” he said, as though amazed. “I love you. Do you hear me? I love you.”

“There's more important things than love,” she returned, thinking as she spoke that this

was easy to say with Gentle awaiting her at home. But it was also true. She'd seen this city

overturned and pitched into dust. Preventing that was indeed more important than love,

especially Oscar's spineless variety.

"Don't forget to lock up after me," she said as she reached the bottom of the stairs. "You

never know what's going to come knocking on the door."

On the way home she stopped to buy groceries, which had never been her favorite chore

but was today elevated into the realms of the surreal by the sense of foreboding she brought

with her. Here she was going about the business of purchasing domestic necessities, while

the image of the killing cloud turned in her head. But life had to go on, even if oblivion

waited in the wings. She needed milk, bread, and toilet paper; she needed deodorant and

waste bags to line the bin in the kitchen. It was only in fiction that the daily round of living

was ignored so that grand events could take center stage. Her body would hunger, tire,

sweat, and digest until the final pall descended. There was peculiar comfort in this thought,

and though the darkness gathering at the threshold of her world should have, distracted her

from trivialities, its presence had precisely the reverse effect. She was more pernickety than

usual about the cheese she bought and sniffed at half a dozen deodorants before she found a

scent that pleased her.

The shopping done, she headed home through streets buzzing with the

business of a sunlit

day, contemplating the problem of Celestine as she went. With Oscar plainly unwilling to aid

her, she would have to look for help elsewhere, and with her circle of trusted souls so

shrunk, that only left Clem and Gentle. The Reconciler had his own agenda, of course, but

after the promises of the night before—the commitments to be with each other, sharing the

fears and the visions—he'd surely understand her need to liberate Celestine, if only to put

an end to the mystery. She would tell him all she knew about Roxborough's prisoner, she

decided, as soon as possible.

He wasn't home when she got back, which was no surprise. He'd warned her that he'd be

keeping odd hours as he laid the groundwork for the Reconciliation. She prepared some

lunch, then decided she hadn't got an appetite and went to work one up by tidying the

bedroom, which was still chaos after the night's traffic. As she straightened the sheets she

discovered they had a tiny occupant: the blue stone (or, as she preferred to think of it, the

egg), which had been in one of the pockets of her ravaged clothes. The sight of it diverted

her from her bed making, and she sat on the edge of the mattress, passing the egg from hand

to hand, wondering if perhaps it could deliver her, even briefly, into the cell where Celestine

was locked. It had of course been much reduced by Dowd's mites, but even when she'd first

discovered it in Estabrook's safe it had been a fragment of a greater form and possessed

some jurisdiction. Did it still?

"Show me the Goddess," she said, clutching the egg tight. "Show me the Goddess."

Spoken plainly that way, the notion of her mind's removal from the physical world, and its

flight, seemed absurd. That wasn't the way the world worked, except perhaps at enchanted

midnights. Now it was the middle of the afternoon, and the noise of day rose through the

open window. She was loath to go and close it, however. She couldn't exile the world every

time she wanted to alter her consciousness. The street and the people in it—the dirt and the

din and the summer sky—all had to be made part of the mechanism for transcendence, or

else she'd come to grief the way her sister had, bound up and blind long before her eyes

went from her head.

As was her wont, she began to talk to herself, coaxing the miracle. "It's happened before,"

she said. "It can happen again. Be patient, woman."

But the longer she sat, the stronger the sense of her own ludicrousness became. The image

of her idiot devotion appeared in her mind's eye. There she was, sitting on the bed, staring

at a piece of dead stone: a study in fatuity,

"Fool," she said to herself.

Suddenly weary of the whole fiasco, she got up from the bed. In that rising she realized her

error. Her mind's eye showed her the motion as if it was detached from her, hovering near

the window. She felt a sudden pang of panic and for the second time in the space of thirty

seconds called herself fool, not for wasting time with the egg but for failing to realize that

the image she'd taken as evidence of her own failure, that of herself sitting waiting for

something to happen, was in fact proof that it had. Her sight had drifted from her so subtly

she'd not even known it had gone.

"The cell," she said, instructing her subtle eye. "Show me the Goddess's cell."

Though it was close to the window, and could have flown from there, her eye instead rose

at a sickening speed, till she was looking down at herself from the ceiling. She saw her body

rock below her, as the flight giddied her. Then her sight descended. The top of her head

loomed like a planet beneath her, and she was plunged into her skull, down, down into the

darkness of her body. She felt her own panic on all sides: the frantic labor of her heart, her

lungs drawing shallow breaths. There was none of the brightness she'd found in Celestine's

body, no hint of that luminous blue the Goddess had shared with the stone. There was only

the dark and its turmoil. She wanted to make the egg understand its

mistake and draw her

mind's eye up out of this pit, but if her lips were making such pleas,
which she doubted, they

were ignored, and her fall went on, and on, as though her sight had
become a fly speck in a

well and would fall for hours without reaching its bowels.

And then, below her, a tiny point of light, which grew as she
approached, to show itself not

a point but a strip of rippling luminescence, like the purest glyph
imaginable. What was this

doing inside her? Was it some relic of the working that had created
her, a fragment of

Sartori's feat, like Gentle's signature hidden in the brushwork of his
forged canvases? She

was upon it now, or rather in it, its brightness a blaze that made her
mind's eye squint.

And out of the blaze, images. Such images! She knew neither their
origins nor their

purpose, but they were exquisite enough to make her forgive the
misdirection that had led

her here rather than to Celestine. She seemed to be in a paradisiacal
city, half overgrown

with glorious flora, the profusion of which was fed by waters that rose
like arches and

colonnades on every side. Flocks of stars flew overhead and made
perfect circles at her

zenith; mists hung at her ankles, laying their veils beneath her feet to
ease her step. She

passed through this city like a hallowed daughter and came to rest in
a large airy room,

where water cascaded in place of doors, and the merest stab of sun
brought rainbows. There

she sat and with these borrowed eyes saw her own face and breasts, so
vast they might have

been sculpted for a temple, raised above her. Did milk seep from her
nipples, and did she

sing a lullaby? She thought so; but her attention strayed too quickly
from breasts and face to

be sure, her gaze turned towards the far end of the chamber.
Somebody had entered: a man,

so wounded and ill—mended she didn't recognize him at first. It was
only when he was

almost upon her that she realized the company she kept. It was
Gentle, unshaven and badly

fed, but greeting her with tears of joy in his eyes. If words were
exchanged she didn't hear

them, but he fell to his knees in front of her, and her gaze went
between his upturned face

and the monumental effigy behind her. It was not, after all, a thing of
painted stone, but was

in this vision made of living flesh, moving, weeping, even glancing
down at the worshiper

she was.

AH this was strange enough, but there was stranger still to come, as
she looked back

towards Gentle and saw him pluck from a hand too tiny to be hers the
very stone that had

given her this dream. He took it with gratitude, his tears finally
abating. Then he rose, and as

he made his way back towards the liquid door, the day beyond it
blazed, and the scene was

washed away in light.

She sensed that the enigma, whatever it signified, was passing away,
but she had no power

to hold it. The glyph in her core appeared before her, and she rose
from it like a diver from

some treasure the deep would not relinquish, up through the dark and
out into the place

she'd left.

Nothing had changed in the room, but a sudden squall was on the
world outside, its torrent

heavy enough to drop a sheet of water between the raised window
and the sill. She stood up,

clutching the stone. The journey had left her lightheaded, however,
and she knew if she tried

to go to the kitchen and put some food in her belly her legs would fold
up beneath her, so

she lay down and let the pillow have her head awhile.

She didn't think she slept, but it was as difficult to distinguish between
sleep and

wakefulness as it had been in Quaisoir's bed. The visions she'd seen in
the darkness of her

own belly were as insistent as some prophetic dream and stayed with
her, the music of the

rain a perfect accompaniment to the memory. It was only when the
clouds moved on, taking

their deluge south, and the sun appeared between the sodden curtains,
that sleep overcame

her.

When she woke, it was to the sound of Gentle's key in the lock. It was
night, or close to it,

and he switched on the light in the adjacent room. She sat up and was about to call to him

when she thought better of it and, instead, watched through the partially open door. She saw

his face for only an instant, but the glimpse was enough to make her want him to come in to

her with kisses. He didn't. Instead, he paced back and forth next door, massaging his hands

as though they ached, working first at the fingers, then at the palms.

Finally, she couldn't be patient any longer and got up, sleepily murmuring his name. He

didn't hear her at first, and she had to speak again before he realized it was being called.

Only then did he turn and put on a smile for her.

"Still awake?" he said fondly. "You shouldn't have stayed up."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. Yes, of course." He put his hands to his face. "This is a hard business, you know. I

didn't expect it to be so difficult."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Some other tune," he said, approaching the door. She took his hands in hers. "What's

this?" he said.

She was still holding the egg, but not for long. He had it from her palm with the ease of a

pickpocket. She wanted to snatch it back, but she fought the instinct and let him study his

prize.

“Pretty,” he said. Then, less lightly: “Where did it come from?”

Why did she hesitate to answer? Because he looked so weary, and she didn't want to

burden him with new mysteries when he had a surfeit of his own? It was that in part; but

there was another part that was altogether less clear to her. Something to do with the fact

that in her vision she'd seen him far more broken than he was at present, wounded and

wretched, and somehow that condition had to remain her secret, at least for a time.

He put the egg to his nose and sniffed it. “I smell you,” he said.

“No....”

“Yes, I do. Where have you been keeping it?” He put his empty hand between her legs. “In

here?”

The thought was not so preposterous. Indeed she might slip it into that pocket, when she

had it back, and enjoy its weight.

“No?” he said. “Well, I'm sure it wishes you would. I think half the world would like to

creep up there if it could.” He pressed his hand against her. “But it's mine, isn't it?”

“Yes.”

“Nobody goes in there but me.”

“No.”

She answered mechanically, her thoughts as much on reclaiming the egg as on his

proprietary talk.

“Have you got anything we can get high on?” he said.

“I had some dope....”

“Where is it?” “I think I smoked the last of it. I'm not sure. Do you want me to look?”

“Yes, please.”

She reached up for the egg, but before her fingers could take hold of it he put it to his lips.

“I want to keep it,” he said. “Sniff it for a while. You don't mind, do you?”

“I'd like it back.”

“You'll have it back,” he said, with a faint air of condescension, as though her

possessiveness was childish. “But I need a keepsake, something to remind me of you.”

“I'll give you some of my underwear,” she said.

“It's not quite the same.”

He laid the egg against his tongue and turned it, coating it in his spittle. She watched him,

and he watched her back. He knew damn well she wanted her toy, but she wasn't going to

stoop to begging him for it.

“You mentioned dope,” he said.

She went back into the bedroom, put on the lamp beside the bed, and searched through the

top drawer of her dresser where she'd last stashed her marijuana.

“Where did you go today?” he asked her.

“I went to Oscar's house.”

“Oscar?”

“Godolphin.”

“And how's Oscar? Alive and kicking?”

“I can't find the dope. I must have smoked it all.”

“You were telling me about Oscar.”

“He's locked himself up in his house.”

“Where does he live? Maybe I should call on him. Reassure him.”

“He won't see you. He won't see anybody. He thinks the world's coming to an end.”

“And what do you think?”

She shrugged. She was quietly raging at him, but she wasn't exactly sure why. He'd taken

the egg for a while, but that wasn't a capital crime. If the stone afforded him a little

protection, why should she be covetous of it? She was being petty, and she wished she could

be other, but without the heat of sex shimmering between them he seemed crass. It was not

a flaw she expected to find in him. Lord knows she'd accused him of countless deficiencies in

her time, but a lack of finesse had never been one of them. If anything, he'd been too much

the polished operator, discreet and suave.

“You were telling me about the end of the world,” he said.

“Was I?”

“Did Oscar frighten you?”

“No. But I saw something that did.”

She told him, briefly, about the bowl and its prophecies. He listened

without comment,

then said, "The Fifth's teetering. We both know that. But it won't touch us."

She'd heard the same sentiments from Oscar, or near enough. Both these men, wanting to

offer her a haven from the storm. She should have been flattered. Gentle looked at his watch.

"I've got to go out again," he said, "You'll be safe here, won't you?"

"I'll be fine."

"You should sleep. Make yourself strong. There's going to be some dark times before it gets

light again, and we're going to find some of that darkness in each other. It's perfectly

natural. We're not angels, after all." He chuckled. "At least, you may be, but I'm not."

So saying, he pocketed the egg.

"Go back to bed," he said. "I'll be back in the morning. And don't worry, nothing's going to

come near you but me. I swear. I'm with you, Judith, all the time. And that's not love talking."

With that, he smiled at her and headed off, leaving her to wonder what indeed had been

talking, if it wasn't love.

“And who the fuck are you?” the filthy, bearded face demanded of the stranger who'd had

the misfortune to stumble into its bleary sight.

The man he was questioning, whom he had by the neck, shook his head. Blood had run

from a crown of cuts and scrapes along his brow, where he'd earlier beaten his skull against

a stone wall to try and silence the din of voices that echoed between his temples. It hadn't

worked. There were still too many names and faces in there to be sorted out. The only way

he could answer his interrogator was with that shaking of his head. Who was he? He didn't

know.

“Well, get the fuck out of here,” the man said.

There was a bottle of cheap wine in his hand, and its stench, mingled with a deeper rot, on

his breath. He pushed his victim against the concrete wall of this underpass and closed upon

him.

“You can't sleep where you fuckin' want. If you want to lie down, you fuckin' ask me first. I

say who sleeps here. Isn't that right?”

He swung his bloodshot eyes in the direction of the tribe who'd clambered from their beds

of trash and newspapers to watch their leader have his sport. There'd be blood, for certain.

There always was when Tolland got riled, and for some reason he was more riled by this

trespasser than by others who'd laid down their homeless heads without his permission.

“Isn't that right?” he said again. “Irish? Tell him! Isn't that right?”

The man he'd addressed muttered something incoherent. The woman beside him, with a

bead of hair bleached to near extinction but black at the roots, came within striking distance

of Tolland—something only a very few dared to do.

“That's right, Tolly,” she said. “That's right.” She looked at the victim without pity. “D'you

think he's a Jew-boy? He's got a Jew-boy's nose.”

Tolland took down a throatful of wine. “Are you a fuckin' yid?” he said.

Someone in the crowd said they should strip him and see. The woman, who went by a

number of names but whom Tolland called Carol when he fucked her, made to do just that,

but he aimed a blow at her and she retreated.

“You get your fuckin' hands off him,” Tolland said. “He'll tell us, won't you, matey? You'll

tell us. Are you a fuckin' yid or not?”

He took hold of the man by the lapel of his jacket.

“I'm waitin',” he said.

The victim dug for a word, and found: “... Gentle ...”

“Gentile?” Tolland said. “Yeah? You a Gentile? Well, I don't give a fuck what you are! I don't

want you here.”

The other nodded and tried to detach Tolland's fingers, but his captor hadn't finished. He

slammed the man against the wall, so hard the breath went out of him.

“Irish? Take the fuckin' bottle.”

The Irishman claimed the bottle from Tolland's hands and stepped back to let him do his

worst.

“Don't kill him,” the woman said,

“What the fuck do you care?” Tolland spat and delivered two, three, four punches to the

Gentile's solar plexus, followed by a knee jab to his groin. Pinned against the wall by his

neck, the man could do little to defend himself, but even that little he failed to do, accepting

the punishment even though tears of pain ran from his eyes. He stared through them with a

look of bewilderment on his face, small exclamations of pain coming with every blow.

“He's a head case, Tolly,” the Irishman said. “Look at him! He's a friggin' head case.”

Tolland didn't glance the Irishman's way, or slow his beating, but delivered a new fusillade

of punches. The Gentile's body now hung limply from the pinion of his hand, the face above

it blanker by the blow.

“You hear me, Tolly?” the Irishman said. “He's a nutter. He's not feeling it.”

“You keep the fuck out of this.”

“Why don't you leave him alone?”

“He's on my fuckin' patch,” Tolland said.

He dragged the Gentile away from the wall and swung him around.
The small crowd

backed off to give their leader room to play. With Irish silenced, there
were no objections

raised from any quarter. Tolland was left to beat the Gentile to the
ground. Then he followed

through with a barrage of kicks. His victim put his hands around his
head and curled up to

protect himself as best he could, whimpering. But Tolland wasn't
about to let the man's face

go unbroken. He reached down and dragged the hands away, raising
his boot to bring it

down. Before he could do so, however, Tolland's bottle hit the floor,
spattering wine as it

smashed. He turned on Irish.

“What the fuck d'you that for?”

“You shouldn't beat up head cases,” the man replied, by his tone
already regretting the

breakage.

“You goin' to stop me?”

“All I'm sayin'—”

“Are you goin' to try and fuckin' stop me?”

“He's not right in the head, Tolly.”

“So I'll kick some sense into him,” Tolland replied.

He dropped his victim's arms, turning all his crazed attention on the
dissenter.

“Or do you want to do it?” he said.

Irish shook his head.

“Go on,” said Tolland. “You do it for me.” He stepped over the Gentile in the Irishman's

direction. “Go on...” he said again. “Go on....”

Irish began to retreat, Tolland bearing down on him. The Gentile had meanwhile turned

himself over and was starting to crawl away, blood running from his nose and from the

wounds reopened on his brow. Nobody moved to help him. When Tolland was roused, as

now, his fury knew no bounds. Anyone who stepped in his way—whether man, woman, or

child—was forfeit. He broke bones and heads without a second thought; had ground a

broken bottle into a man's eye once, not twenty yards from this spot, for the crime of

looking at him too long. There wasn't a cardboard city north or south of the river where he

wasn't known, and prayers said in the hope that he'd not come visiting.

Before he could grab hold of Irish the man threw up his hands in defeat.

“All right, Tolly, all right,” he said. “It was my mistake. I swear, I'm sorry.”

“You broke my fuckin bottle.”

“Hi fetch you another. I will. I'll do it now.”

Irish had known Tolland longer than anyone else in this circle and was familiar with the

rules of placation: copious apology, witnessed by as many of Tolland's tribe as possible. It

wasn't foolproof, but today it worked.

“Will I be fetchin' you a bottle now?” Irish said.

“Get me two, you fuckin' scab.”

“That's what I am, Tolly. I'm a scab.”

“And one for Carol,” Tolland said.

“I'll do that”

Tolland leveled a grimy finger at Irish. “And don't you ever try crossin' me again, or I'll

have your fuckin' balls.”

With this promise made, ToUand turned back to his victim. Seeing that the Gentile had

already crawled some distance from him, he let out an incoherent roar of fury, and those of

the crowd who were standing within a yard or two of the path between him and his target

retreated. Tolland didn't hurry, but watched as the wounded Gentile laboriously got to his

feet and began to make a staggering escape through the chaos of boxes and strewn bedding.

Up ahead, a youth of sixteen or so was kneeling on the ground, covering the concrete slabs

underfoot with designs in colored chalk, blowing the pastel dust off his handiwork as he

went. Engrossed in his art he'd ignored the beating that had claimed the attention of the

others, but now he heard Tolland's voice echoing through the underpass, calling his nam e.

“Monday, you fuckhead! Get hold of him!”

The youth looked up. His hair was cropped to a dark fuzz, his skin pockmarked, his ears

sticking out like handles. His gaze was clear, however, despite the track marks that

disfigured his arms, and it took him only a second to realize his dilemma. If he brought down

the bleeding man, he'd condemn him. If he didn't, he'd condemn himself. To gain a little time

he feigned bafflement, cupping his hand behind his ear as if he'd missed Tolland's

instruction.

“Stop him!” came the brute's command.

Monday started to get to his feet, murmuring, “Get the fuck out of here,” to the escapee as

he did so.

But the idiot had stumbled to a halt, his eyes fixed on the picture Monday had been

making. It was filched from a newspaper photo of a starlet, wide-eyed, posing with a koala in

her arms. Monday had rendered the woman with loving accuracy, but the koala had become

a patchwork beast, with a single burning eye in its brooding head.

“Didn't you hear me?” Monday said.

The man ignored him.

“It's your funeral,” he said, rising now as Tolland approached, pushing the man from the

edge of his picture. “Go on,” he said, “or he'll bust it iip! Get away!” He pushed hard, but the

man remained fixated. "You're gettin' blood on it, dickhead!"

Tolland yelled for Irish, and the man hurried to his side, eager to make good.

"What, Tolly?"

"Collar that fuckin' kid."

Irish was obedient and headed straight for Monday, taking hold of the boy. Tolland,

meanwhile, had caught up with the Gentile, who hadn't moved from his place on the edge of

the colored paving.

"Don't let him bleed on it!" Monday begged.

Tolland threw the youth a glance, then stepped onto the picture, scraping his boots over

the carefully worked face. Monday raised a moan of protest as he watched the bright chalk

colons reduced to a gray-brown dust.

"Don't, man, don't," he pleaded.

But his complaints only riled the vandal further. Seeing Monday's tobacco tin of chalks

within reach of his boot, Tolland went to scatter them, but Monday, dragging himself out of

Irish's grip, flung himself down to preserve them. Tolland's kick landed in the boy's flank,

and he was sent sprawling, rolled in chalk dust. Tolland's heel booted the tin and its

contents, then he came after its protector a second time. Monday curled up, anticipating the

blow. But it never landed. The Gentile's voice came between Tolland

and his intention.

“Don't do that,” he said.

Nobody had custody of him, and he could have made another attempt to escape while

Tolland went after Monday, but he was still at the edge of the picture, his gaze no longer on

it but on its spoiler.

“What the fuck did you say?” Tolland's mouth opened like a toothed wound in his matted

beard.

“I said: Don't ...do... that,”

Whatever pleasure Tolland had derived from this hunt was over now, and there wasn't one

among the spectators who didn't know it. The sport that would have ended with an ear

bitten off or a few broken ribs had become something else entirely, and several of the crowd,

having no stomach for what they knew was coming, retired from their places at the ringside.

Even the hardest of them backed away a few paces, their drugged, drunken, or simply

addled minds dimly aware that something far worse than bloodletting was imminent.

Tolland turned on the Gentile, reaching into his jacket as he did so. A knife emerged, its

nine-inch blade marked with nicks and scratches. At the sight of it, even Irish retreated. He'd

seen Tolland's blade at work only once before, but it was enough.

There were no jabs or taunts now, just Tolland's drink—rotted bulk lurking towards his

victim to bring the man down. The Gentile stepped back as the knife came, his eyes going to

the designs underfoot. They were like the pictures that filled his head to overflowing;

brightnesses that had been smeared into gray dust. But somewhere in the midst of that dust

he remembered another place like this: a makeshift town, full of filth and rage, where

somebody or something had come for his life as this man was coming, except that this other

executioner had carried a fire in his head, to burn the flesh away, and all that he, the Gentile,

had owned by way of defense was empty hands.

He raised them now. They were as marked as the knife the executioner was carrying, their

backs bloodied from his attempt to stem the flow from his nose. He uncurled them, as he'd

done many times before, drawing breath as he chose his right over his left and, without

understanding why, put it to his mouth.

The pneuma flew before Tolland had time to raise his blade, hitting him on the shoulder

with such force he was thrown to the ground. Shock took his voice away for several seconds,

then his hand went to his gushing shoulder and he loosed a noise more shriek than roar. The

few witnesses who'd remained to watch the killing were rooted to the spot, their eyes not on

their fallen lord but on his deposer. Later, when they told this story, they'd all describe what

they'd seen in different ways. Some would talk of a knife produced

from hiding, used, and

concealed again so fast the eye could barely catch it. Others of a bullet, spat from between

the Gentile's teeth. But nobody doubted that something remarkable had taken place in these

seconds. A wonder worker had appeared among them and laid the tyrant Tolland low

without even touching him.

The wounded man wasn't bested so easily, however. Though his blade had gone from his

fingers (and been surreptitiously swiped by Monday) he still had his tribe to defend him. He

summoned them now, with wild screeches of rage.

“See what he did? What are you fuckin' waitin' for? Take him! Take the fucker! No one does

that to me! Irish? Irish? Where the fuck are you? Somebody help me!”

It was the woman who came to his aid, but he pushed her aside.

“Where the fuck's Irish?”

“I'm here.”

“Take hold of the bastard,” Tolland said.

Irish didn't move.

“D'you hear me? He used some fuckin' Jew-boy trick on me! You saw him. Some yid trick, it

was.”

“I saw him,” said Irish.

“He'll do it again! He'll do it to you!”

“I don't think he's goin' to do anything to anybody.”

“Then break his fuckin' head.”

“You can do it if you like,” Irish said. “I’m not touching him.”

Despite his wounding and his bulk, Tolland was up on his feet in seconds, and going at his

sometime lieutenant like a bull, but the Gentile’s hand was on his shoulder before his fingers

could get to the man’s throat. He stopped in his tracks, and the spectators had sight of the

day’s second wonder: fear on Tolland’s face. There’d be no ambiguity in their reports of this.

When word went out across the city—as it did within the hour, passed from one asylum

Tolland had spoiled with blood to another—the account, though embroidered in the telling,

was at root the same. Drool had run from Tolland’s mouth, it said, and his face had got

sweaty. Some said piss ran from the bottom of his trousers and filled his boots.

“Let Irish alone,” the Gentile told him. “In fact ...let us all alone.”

Tolland made no reply. He simply looked at the hand laid on him and seemed to shrink. It

wasn’t his wounding that made him so quiescent, or even fear of the Gentile attacking a

second time. He’d sustained injuries far worse than the wound on his shoulder and simply

been inflamed to fresh cruelties. It was the touch he shrank from: the Gentile’s hand laid

lightly on his shoulder. He turned and backed away from his wounder, glancing from side to

side as he did so, in the hope that there would be somebody to support him. But everyone,

including Irish and Carol, gave him a wide berth.

“You can't do this,” he said when he'd put five yards between himself and the Gentile. “I've

got friends all over! Ill see you dead, fucker. I will. I'll see you dead!”

The Gentile simply turned his back on this and stooped to claim from the ground the

scattered shards of Monday's chalks. This casual gesture was in its way more eloquent than

any counter—threat or show of power, announcing as it did his complete indifference to the

other man's presence. Tolland stared at the Gentile's bent back for several seconds, as if

calculating the risk of mounting another attack. Then, calculations made, he turned and fled.

“He's gone,” said Monday, who was crouching beside the Gentile and watching over his

shoulder.

“Do you have any more of these?” the stranger said, rocking the colors in the cradle of his

palm.

“No. But I can get some. Do you draw?”

The Gentile stood up. “Sometimes,” he said.

“Do you copy stuff, like me?”

“I don't remember.”

“I can teach you, if you want.”

“No,” the Gentile replied. “I'll copy from my head.” He looked down at the crayons in his

hand. “I can empty it that way.”

“Could you be doin' with paint as well?” Irish asked, as the Gentile's gaze went to the gray

concrete all around them.

“You could get paint?”

“Me and Carol here, we can get anything. Whatever you want, Gentile, we'll get it for you.”

“Then ... I want all the colors you can find.” “Is that all? You don't want something to

drink?” But the Gentile didn't reply. He was wandering towards the pillar against which

Tolland had first pinned him and was applying a color to it. The chalk'in his fin gers was

yellow, and with it he began to draw the circle of the sun.

When Jude woke it was almost noon: eleven hours or more since Gentile had come home,

relieved her of the egg that had brought her a glimpse of Nirvana, then headed out again into

the night. She felt sluggish and pained by the light. Even when she turned the hot water in

her shower to a trickle and let it run near cold, it failed to fully waken her. She toweled

herself half dry and padded through to the kitchen naked. The window was open there, and

the breeze brought goose bumps. At least this was some sign of life, she thought, negligible

though it was.

She put on some coffee and the television, flipping the channels from one banality to

another, then letting it burble along with the percolator while she dressed. The telephone

rang while she was looking for her second shoe. There was a din of traffic at the other end of

the line, but no voice, and after a couple of seconds the line went dead. She put down the

receiver and stayed by the phone, wondering if this was Gentle trying to get through. Thirty

seconds later the phone rang again. This time there was a speaker: a man, whose voice was

barely more than a ragged whisper.

“For Christ's sake ...”

“Who is this?”

“Oh, Judith ... God, God... Judith? ... It's Oscar....”

“Where are you?” she said. He was very clearly not locked up in his house.

“They're dead, Judith.”

“Who are?”

“Now it's me. Now it wants me.”

“I'm not getting this, Oscar. Who's dead?” “Help me... you've got to help me.... Nowhere' s

safe.” “Come to the Hat then.” “No ... you come here....” “Where's here?”

“I'm at St. Martin-in-the-Fields. Do you know it?” “What the hell are you doing there?” “I'll

be waiting inside. But hurry. It's going to find me. It's going to find me.”

The traffic around the square was locked, as was often the case at noon, the breeze that

had brought gooseflesh an hour before too meek to disperse the fog of

countless exhausts

and the fumes of as many frustrated drivers. Nor was the air inside the church any less stale,

though it was pure ozone beside the smell of fear that came off the man sitting close to the

altar, his thick hands knitted so tightly the bone of his knuckles showed through the fat.

"I thought you said you weren't going to leave the house," she reminded him.

"Something came for me," Oscar said, his eyes wide. "In the middle of the night. It tried to

get in, but it couldn't. Then this morning—in broad daylight—I heard the .parrots kicking up

a din, and the back door was blown off its hinges."

"Did you see what it was?"

"Do you think I'd be here if I had? No; I was ready, after the first time. As soon as I heard

the birds I ran for the front door. Then this terrible din, and all the lights went out...."

He divided his hands and took light hold of her arm.

"What am I going to do?" he said. "It'll find me, sooner or later. It's killed all the rest of

them—"

"Who?"

"Haven't you seen the headlines? They're all dead. Lionel, McGann, Bloxham. Even the

ladies. Shales was in his bed. Cut up in pieces in his own bed, I ask you, what kind of

creature does that?"

“A quiet one.”

“How can you joke?”

“I joke, you sweat. We deal with it the best way we know how.” She sighed. “You're a better

man than this, Oscar. You shouldn't be hiding away. There's work to do.”

“Don't tell me about your damn Goddess, Judith. It's a lost cause. The tower'll be rubble by

now.”

“If there's any help for us,” she said, “it's there. I know it. Come with me, won't you? I've

seen you brave. What's happened to you?”

“I don't know,” he said. “I wish I did. All these years I've been crossing over to

Yzordderrex, not giving a damn where I put my nose, not caring whether I was at risk or not,

as long as there were new sights to see. It was another world. Maybe another me, too.”

“And here?”

He made a baffled face. “This is England,” he said. “Safe, rainy, boring England, where the

cricket's bad and the beer's warm. This isn't supposed to be a dangerous place.”

“But it is, Oscar, whether we like it or not. There's a darkness here worse than anything in

Yzordderrex. And it's got your scent. There's no escaping that. It's coming after you. And me,

for all I know.”

“But why?”

“Maybe it thinks you can do it some harm.”

“What can I do? I don't know a damn thing.”

“But we could learn,” she said. “That way, if we're going to die, at least it won't be in

ignorance.”

DESPITE OSCAR'S PREDICTION, the Tabula Rasa's tower was still standing, any trace of

distinction it might have once owned eroded by the sun, which blazed with noonday fervor

at well past three. Its ferocity had taken its toll on the trees that shielded the tower from the

road, leaving their leaves to hang like dishrags from their branches. If there were any birds

taking cover in the foliage, they were too exhausted to sing.

"When were you last here?" Oscar asked Jude as they drove into the empty forecourt.

She told him about her encounter with Bloxham, squeezing the account for its humorous

effect in the hope of distracting Oscar from his anxiety.

"I never much liked Bloxham," Oscar replied. "He was so damn full of himself. Mind you, so

were we all...." His voice trailed away, and with all the enthusiasm of a man approaching the

execution block, he got out of the car and led her to the front door.

"There's no alarms ringing," he said. "If there's anybody inside, they got in with a key."

He'd pulled a cluster of his own keys out of his pocket and selected one.

"Are you sure this is wise?" he asked her.

"Yes, I am."

Resigned to this insanity, he unlocked the door and, after a moment's hesitation, headed

inside. The foyer was cold and gloomy, but the chill only served to make Jude brisk.

“How do we get down into the cellar?” she said.

“You want to go straight down there?” he replied. “Shouldn't we check upstairs first?”

Somebody could be here.”

“Somebody is here, Oscar. She's in the cellar. You can check upstairs if you want to, but I'm

going down. The less time we waste the sooner we're out of here.”

It was a persuasive argument, and he conceded to it with a little nod. He dutifully fished

through the bunch of keys a second time and, having chosen one, went over to the farthest

and smallest of the three closed doors ahead. Having taken his time selecting the right key,

he now took even longer to get it into the lock and coax it into turning.

“How often have you been down there?” she asked him while he worked.

“Only twice,” he replied. “It's a pretty grim place.”

“I know,” she reminded him.

“On the other hand, my father seemed to make quite a habit of exploring down there.

There's rules and regulations, you know, about nobody looking through the library on their

own, in case they're tempted by something they read. I'm sure he flouted all that. Ah!” The

key turned. “That's one of them!” He selected a second key and started on the other lock.

“Did your father talk to you about the cellar?” she asked him.

“Once or twice. He knew more about the Dominions than he should have done. I think he

even knew a few feits. I can't be sure. He was a cagey bugger. But at the end, when he was

delirious, he'd mutter these names. Patashoqua, I remember. He repeated that over and

over.”

“Do you think he ever crossed into the Dominions?”

“I doubt it.”

“So you worked out how to do that on your own?”

“I found a few books down here and smuggled them out. It wasn't difficult to get t the circle

working. Magic doesn't decay. It's about the only thing”—he paused, grunted, forced the

key—“that doesn't.” It began to turn, but not all the way. “I think Papa would have liked

Patashoqua,” he went on. “But it was only a name to him, poor sod.”

“It'll be different after the Reconciliation,” Jude said. “I know it's too late for him —”

“On the contrary,” Oscar said, grimacing as he bullied the key. “From what I hear, the dead

are just as locked up as the rest of us. There's spirits everywhere, according to Peccable,

ranting and raving.”

“Even in here?”

“Especially in here,” he said.

With that, the lock gave up its resistance, and the key turned.

“There,” he said. “Just like magic.”

“Wonderful.” She patted his back. “You’re a genius.”

He grinned at her. The dour, defeated man she’d found sweating in the pews an hour ago

had lightened considerably now there was something to distract him from his death

sentence. He withdrew the key from the lock and turned the handle. The door was stout and

heavy, but it opened without much resistance. He preceded her into the darkness.

“If I remember right,” he said, “there’s a light here.

No?” He patted the wall to the side of the door. “Ah! Wait!”

A switch flipped, and a row of bare bulbs, strung from a cable, illuminated the room. It was

large, wood-paneled, and austere.

“This is the one part of Roxborough’s house still intact, besides the cellar.” There was a

plain oak table in the middle of the room, with several chairs around it, “This is where they

met, apparently: the first Tabula Rasa. And they kept meeting here, over the years, until the

house was demolished.”

“Which was when?”

“In the late twenties.”

“So a hundred and fifty years of Godolphin bums sat on one of those seats?”

“That’s right.”

“Including Joshua.”

“Presumably.”

"I wonder how many of them I knew?"

"Don't you remember?"

"I wish I did. I'm still waiting for the memories to come back. In fact, I'm beginning to

wonder if they ever will."

"Maybe you're repressing them for a reason?"

"Why? Because they're so appalling I can't face them? Because I acted like a whore; let

myself be passed around the table with the port, left to right? No, I don't think that's it at all.

I can't remember because I wasn't really living. I was sleepwalking, and nobody wanted to

wake me."

She looked up at him, almost defying him to defend his family's ownership of her. He said

nothing, of course. Instead, he moved to the vast grate, ducking beneath the mantelpiece,

selecting a third key as he went. She heard him slot it in the lock and turn it, heard the

motion of cogs and counterweights its turning initiated, and, finally, heard the groan of the

concealed door as it opened. He glanced back at her.

"Are you coming?" he said. "Be careful. The steps are steep."

The flight was not only steep but long. What little light spilled from the room above

dwindled after half a dozen steps, and she descended twice that number in darkness before

Oscar found a switch below, and lights ran off along the labyrinth. A sense of triumph ran

through her. She'd put her desire to find a way into this underworld aside many times since

the dream of the blue eye had brought her to Celestine's cell, but it had never died. Now,

finally, she was going to walk where her dream sight h'ad gone, through this mine o f books

with its seams to the ceiling, to the place where the Goddess lay.

"This is the single largest collection of sacred texts since the library at Alexandria," Oscar

said, his museum-guide tone a defense, she suspected, against the sense of moment he

shared with her. "There are books here even the Vatican doesn't know exist." He lowered his

voice, as though there might be other browsers here that he'd disturb if he spoke too loudly.

"The night he died, Papa told me he found a book here written by the Fourth King."

"The what?"

"There were three kings at Bethlehem, remember? According to the Gospels. But the

Gospels lied. There were four. They were looking for the Reconciler."

"Christ was a Reconciler?"

"So Papa said."

"And you believe that?"

"Papa had no reason to lie."

"But the book, Oscar; the book could have lied."

"So could the Bible. Papa said this Magi wrote his story because he knew he'd been cut out

of the Gospels. It was this fellow named the Imajica. Wrote the word down in this book.

There it was on the page for the first time in history. Papa said he wept.”

Jude surveyed the labyrinth that spread from the foot of the stairs with fresh respect.

“Have you tried to find the book since?”

“I didn't need to. When Papa died I went in search of the real thing. I traveled back and

forth as though Christos had succeeded and the Fifth was reconciled. And there they were,

the Unbeheld's many mansions.”

And there, too, the most enigmatic player in this interDominional drama: Hapexamendios.

If Christos was a Reconciler, did that make the Unbeheld Christos' Father? Was the force in

hiding behind the fogs of the First Dominion the Lord of Lords, and, if so, why had He

crushed every Goddess across the Imajica, as legend said He had? One question begged

another, all from a few claims made by a man who'd knelt at the Nativity. No wonder

Roxborough had buried these books alive.

“Do you know where your mystery woman's lurking?” Oscar said.

“Not really.”

“Then we've got a hell of a search on our hands,”

“I remember there was a couple making love down here, near her cell. One of them was

Bloxham.”

“Dirty little bugger. So we should be looking for some stains on the floor, is that it? I

suggest we split up, or we'll be here all summer.”

They parted at the stairs and made their separate ways. Jude soon discovered how

strangely sound carried in the tunnels. Sometimes she could hear Godolphin's footsteps so

clearly she thought he must be following her. Then she'd turn a corner (or else he would)

and the noise would not simply fade but vanish altogether, leaving only the pad of her own

soles on the cold stone to keep her company. They were buried too deeply for even the

remotest murmur from the street above to penetrate, nor was there any suspicion of sound

from the earth around them: no hum of cables; no sluicing of drains.

She was several times tempted to pluck one of the tomes from its shelf, thinking perhaps

serendipity would put her in reach of the diary of the Fourth King. But she resisted, knowing

that even if she had time to browse here, which she didn't, the volumes were written in the

great languages of theology and philosophy: Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Sanskrit, all

incomprehensible to her. As ever on this journey, she'd have to beat a track to the truth by

instinct and wit alone. Nothing had been given to her to illuminate the way except the blue

eye, and that was in Gentle's possession now. She'd reclaim it as soon as she saw him again,

give him something else as a talisman: the hair of her sex, if that's

what he wanted. But not

her egg; not her cool blue egg.

Maybe it was these thoughts that ushered her to the place where the lovers had stood;

maybe it was that same serendipity she'd hoped might lead her hand to the King's book. If

so, this was a finer leading. Here was the wall where Bloxham and his mistress had coupled;

she knew it without a trace of doubt. Here were the shelves the woman had clung to while

her ridiculous beau had labored to fulfill her. Between the books they bore, the mortar was

tinged with the faintest trace of blue. She didn't call Oscar but went to the shelves and took

down several armfuls of books, then put her fingers to the stains. The wall was bitterly cold,

but the mortar crumbled beneath her touch, as though her sweat was sufficient agent to

unbind its elements. She was shocked at what she'd caused, and gratified, retreating from

the wall as the message of dissolution spread with extraordinary rapidity. The mortar began

to run from between the bricks like the finest of sand, its trickle becoming a torrent in

seconds.

"I'm here," she told the prisoner behind the wall. "God knows, I've taken my time. But I'm

here."

Oscar didn't catch Jude's words, not even the remotest echo. His attention had been

claimed two or three minutes before by a sound from overhead, and he'd climbed the stairs

in pursuit of its source. He'd disgraced his manhood enough in the last few days, hiding

himself away like a frightened widow, and the thought that he might reclaim some of the

respect he'd lost in Jude's eyes by confronting the trespasser above gave purpose to the

chase. He'd armed himself with a piece of timber he'd found at the bottom of the stairs and

was almost hoping as he went that his ears weren't playing tricks on him, and that there was

indeed something tangible up above. He was sick of being in fear of rumors, and of pictures

half glimpsed in flying stones. If there was something to see, he wanted to see it and either

be damned in the seeing or cured of fear.

At the top of the stairs he hesitated. The light spilling through the door from Roxborough's

room was moving, very slightly. He took his bludgeon in both hands and stepped through the

door. The room swung with the lights, the solid table and its solid chairs giddied by the

motion. He surveyed the room from corner to corner. Finding every shadow empty, he

moved towards the door that led out into the foyer, as delicately as his bulk allowed. The

rocking of the lights settled as he went, and they were still by the time he reached the door.

As he stepped outside a perfume caught his nostrils, as sweet as the

sudden, sharp pain in

his side was sour. He tried to turn but his attacker dug a second time.
The timber went from

his hand, and a shout came from his lips....

“Oscar?”

She didn't want to leave the wall of Celestine's cell when it was
undoing itself with such

gusto—the bricks were dropping onto each other as the mortar
between them decayed, and

the shelves were creaking, ready to fall—but Oscar's shout demanded
her attention. She

headed back through the maze, the sound of the wall's capitulation
echoing through the

passageways, confounding her. But she found her way back to the
stairs after a time, yelling

for Oscar as she went. There was no reply from the library itself, so
she decided to climb

back up into the meeting room. That too was silent and empty, as was
the foyer when she

got to it, the only sign that Oscar had passed through a block of wood
lying close to the door.

What the hell was he up to? She went out to see if he'd returned to the
car for some reason,

but there was no sign of him in the sun, which narrowed the options
to one: the tower

above.

Irritated, but a little anxious now, she looked towards the open door
that led back into the

cellar, torn between returning to welcome Celestine and following
Oscar up the tower. A

man of his bulk was perfectly capable of defending himself, she reasoned, but she couldn't

help but feel some residue of responsibility, given that she'd cajoled him into coming here in

the first place.

One of the doors looked to be a lift, but when she approached she heard the hum of its

motor in action, so rather than wait she went to the stairs and began to climb. Though the

flight was in darkness, she didn't let that slow her but mounted the stairs three and four at a

time until she reached the door that led out onto the top floor. As she groped for the handle

she heard a voice from the suite beyond. The words were indecipherable, but the voice

sounded cultivated, almost clipped. Had one of the Tabula Rasa survived after all? Bloxham,

perhaps, the Casanova of the cellar?

She pushed the door open. It was brighter on the other side, though not by that much. All

the rooms along the corridor were murky pits, their drapes drawn. But the voice led her on

through the gloom towards a pair of doors, one of which was ajar. A light was burning on the

other side. She approached with caution, the carpet underfoot lush enough to silence her

tread. Even when the speaker broke off from his monologue for a few moments she

continued to advance, reaching the suite without a sound. There was little purpose in delay,

she thought, once she was at the threshold. Without a word, she

pushed open the door.

There was a table in the room, and on it lay Oscar, in a double pool: one of light, the other

of blood. She didn't scream, or even sicken, even though he was laid open like a patient in

mid-surgery. Her thoughts flew past the horror to the man and his agonies. He was alive. She

could see his heart beating like a fish in a red pool, gasping its last.

The surgeon's knife had been cast onto the table beside him, and its owner, who was

presently concealed by shadow, said, "There you are. Come in, why don't you? Come in." He

put his hands, which were clean, on the table. "It's only me, lovey."

"Dowd...."

"Ah! To be remembered. It seems such a little thing, doesn't it? But it's not. Really, it's not."

The old theatricality was still in his manner, but the mellifluous quality had gone from his

voice. He sounded, and indeed looked, like a parody of himself, his face a mask carved by a

hack.

"Do join us, lovey," he said. "We're in this together, after all."

Startled as she was to see him (though hadn't Oscar warned her that his type was difficult

to kill?) she didn't feel intimidated by him. She'd seen his tricks and deceits and

performances; she'd seen him hanging over an abyss, begging for life. He was ridiculous.

“I wouldn't touch Godolphin, by the way,” he said.

She ignored the advice and went to the table.

“His life's hanging by a thread,” Dowd went on. “If he's moved, I swear his innards will just

drop out. My advice is let him lie. Enjoy the moment.”

“Enjoy?” she said, the revulsion she felt surfacing, though she knew it was exactly what the

bastard wanted to hear.

“Not so loud, sweetie,” Dowd said, as if pained by her volume. “You'll wake the baby.” He

chuckled. “He is a baby, really, compared to us. Such a little life...”

“Why did you do this?”

“Where do I begin? With the petty reasons? No. With the big one. I did it to be free.” He

leaned in towards her, his face a chiaroscuro jigsaw beneath the lamp. “When he breathes

his last, lovey—which'H be very soon now—that's the end of the Godolphins. When he's

gone, we're in thrall to nobody.”

“You were free in Yzordderrex.”

“No. On a long leash, maybe, but never free. I felt his desires, I felt his discomforts. A little

part of me knew I should be at home with him, making his tea and drying between his toes.

In my heart, I was still his slave.” He looked at the body again. “It seems almost miraculous,

how he manages to linger.”

He reached for the knife.

“Leave him!” she snapped, and he retreated with surprising alacrity.

She leaned towards Oscar, afraid to touch him for fear of shocking his traumatized system

further and stopping it. There were tics in his face, and his white lips were full of tiny

tremors.

“Oscar?” she murmured. “Can you hear me?”

“Oh, look at you, lovey,” Dowd cooed. “Getting all doe-eyed over him. Remember how he

used you. How he oppressed you.”

She leaned closer to Oscar and said his name again.

“He never loved either of us,” Dowd went on. “We were his goods and chattels. Part of

his...”

Oscar's eyes flickered open.

“. . . inheritance,” Dowd said, but the word was barely audible. As the eyes opened, Dowd

retreated a second step, covering himself in shadow.

Oscar's white lips shaped the syllables of Judith's name, but there was no sound to

accompany the motion.

“Oh, God,” she murmured, “can you hear me? I want you to know this wasn't all for

nothing. I found her. Do you understand? I found her.”

Oscar made a tiny nod, then, with agonizing delicacy, ran his tongue over his lips and drew

enough breath to say, “It wasn't true....”

She caught the words, but not their sense. “What wasn't true?” she

said.

He licked again, his face knotting up with the effort of speech. This time there was only one

word: "Inheritance. ..."

"Not an inheritance?" she said. "I know that."

He made the very tiniest smile, his gaze going over her face from brow to cheek, from

cheek to lips, then back to her eyes, meeting them unabashed.

"I... loved ... you," he said.

"I know that too," she whispered.

Then his gaze lost its clarity. His heart stopped beating in its bloody pool; the knots on his

face slipped with its cessation. He was gone. The last of the Godolphins, dead on the Tabul a

Rasa's table.

She stood upright, staring at the cadaver, though it distressed her to do so. If she was ever

tempted to toy with darkness, let this sight be a scourge to that temptation. There was

nothing poetic or noble in this scene, only waste.

"So there it is," Dowd said. "Funny. I don't feel any different. It may take time, of course. I

suppose freedom has to be learned, like anything else." She could hear desperation beneath

this babble, barely concealed. He was in pain. "You should know something," he said. "I don't

want to hear."

"No, listen, lovey, I want you to know.... He did exactly this to me, on

this very table. He

gutted me in front of the Society. Maybe it's a petty thing, wanting revenge, but then I'm just

an actor chappie. What do I know?"

"You killed them all for that?"

"Who?"

"The Society."

"No, not yet. But I'll get to them. For us both."

"You're too late. They're already dead."

This hushed him for fully fifteen seconds. When he began again, it was more chatter, as

empty as the silence he wanted to fill.

"It was that damn purge, you know; they made themselves too many enemies. There's

going to be a lot of minor Maestros crawling out of the woodwork in the next few days. It's

quite an anniversary, isn't it? I'm going to get stinking drunk. What about you? How will you

celebrate, alone or with friends? This woman you found, for instance. Is she the partying

type?"

Jude silently cursed her indiscretion.

"Who is she?" Dowd went on. "Don't tell me Clara had a sister." He laughed. "I'm sorry, I

shouldn't laugh, but she was crazy as a coot; you must see that now. She didn't understand

you. Nobody understands you but me, lovey, and I understand you—"

"—because we're the same."

"Exactly. We don't belong to anybody any more. We're our own inventions. We'll do what

we want, when we want, and we won't give a fuck for the consequences."

"Is that freedom?" she said flatly, finally taking her eyes off Oscar and looking up at Dowd's

misshapen form.

"Don't try and tell me you don't want it," Dowd said. "I'm not asking you to love me for

this, I'm not that stupid, but at least admit it was just."

"Why didn't you murder him in his bed years ago?"

"I wasn't strong enough. Oh, I realize I may not radiate health and efficiency just at the

moment, but I've changed a lot since we last met. I've been down among the dead. It was

very ... educational. And while I was down there, it began to rain. Such a hard rain, lovey, let

me tell you. I never saw its like before. You want to see what fell on me?"

He pulled up his sleeve and put his arm into the pool of light. Here was the reason for his

lumpen appearance. His arm, and presumably his entire body, was a patchwork, with the

flesh half sealed over fragments of stone which he'd slid into his wounds. She instantly

recognized the iridescence that ran in the fragments, lending their glamour to his wretched

meat. The rain that had fallen on his head was the sloughings of the Pivot.

“You know what it is, don't you?”

She hated the ease with which he read her face, but there was no use denying what she knew.

“Yes, I do,” she said. “I was in the tower when it started to collapse.”

“What a Godsend, eh? It makes me slow, of course, carrying this kind of weight, but after

today I won't be fetching and carrying, so what do I care if it takes me half an hour to cross

the room? I've got power in me, lovey, and I don't mind sharing—”

He stopped and withdrew his arm from the light.

“What was that?”

She'd heard nothing, but she did now: a distant rumbling from below.

“Whatever were you up to down there? Not destroying the library, I hope. I wanted that

satisfaction for myself. Oh, dear. Well, there'll be plenty of other chances to play the

barbarian. It's in the air, don't you think?”

Jude's thoughts went to Celestine. Dowd was perfectly capable of doing her harm. She had

to go back down and warn the Goddess, perhaps find some means of defense. In the

meantime, she'd play along.

“Where will you go after this?” she asked Dowd, lightening her tone as best she could.

“Back to Regent's Park Road, I thought. We can sleep in our master's bed. Oh, what am I

saying? Please don't think I want your body. I know the rest of the

world thinks heaven's in

your lap, but I've been celibate for two hundred years and I've completely lost the urge. We

can live as brother and sister, can't we? That doesn't sound so bad, now, does it?"

"No," she said, fighting the urge to spit her disgust in his face. "No, it doesn't."

"Well, look, why don't you wait for me downstairs? I've got a bit of business left to do here.

Rituals have to be observed."

"Whatever you say," she replied.

She left him to his farewells, whatever they were, and headed back to the stairs. The

rumbling that had caught his attention had ceased, but she hurried down the concrete flight

with high hopes. The cell was open, she knew it. In a matter of moments she'd set her eyes

on the Goddess and, perhaps as importantly, Celestine would set her eyes on Jude. In one

sense, what Dowd had expressed above was true. With Oscar dead, she was indeed free from

the curse of her creation. It was time to know herself and be known.

As she walked through the remaining room of Roxborough's house and started down the

stairs into the cellar, she sensed the change that had come over the maze below. She didn't

have to search for the cell; the energy in the air moved like an invisible tide, carrying her

towards its source. And there it was, in front of her: the cell wall a heap of splinters and

rumble, the gap its collapse had made rising to the ceiling. The dissolution she'd initiated

was still going on. Even as she approached, further bricks fell away, their mortar turned to

dust. She braved the fall, clambering up over the wreckage to peer into the cell. It was dark

inside, but her eyes soon found the mummified form of the prisoner, lying in the dirt.

There was no movement in the body whatsoever. She went to it and fell to her knees to

tear at the fine threads that Roxborough or his agents had bound Celestine with. They were

too tough for her fingers, so she went at them with her teeth. The threads were bitter, but

her teeth were sharp, and once one succumbed to her bites others quickly followed. A

tremor passed through the body, as if the captive sensed liberation. As with the bricks, the

message of unmaking was contagious, and she'd only snapped half a dozen of the threads

when they began to stretch and break of their own volition, aided by the motion of the body

they'd bound. Her cheek was stung by the flight of one, and she was obliged to retreat as the

unfettering spread, the threads describing sinuous motions as they broke, their severed

ends bright.

The tremors in Celestine's body were now convulsions, growing as the ambition of the

threads increased. They weren't simply flying wildly, Jude realized; they were reaching out

in all directions, up towards the ceiling of the cell and to its walls.
Stung by them once, the

only way she could avoid further contact was by backing away to the
hole through which

she'd come and then out, stumbling over the rubble.

As she emerged she heard Dowd's voice, somewhere in the labyrinth
behind her. "What

have you been doing, lovey?"

She wasn't quite sure, was the truth. Though she'd been the initiator of
this unbinding, she

wasn't its mistress. The cords had an urgency of their own, and
whether it was Celestine

who moved them, or Roxborough who'd plaited into them the
instruction to destroy anyone

who came seeking his prisoner's release, they were not about to be
placated or contained.

Some were snatching at the edge of the hole, dragging away more of
the bricks. Others,

demonstrating an elasticity she hadn't expected, were nosing over the
rubble, turning over

stones and books as they advanced.

"Oh, my Lord," she heard Dowd say, and turned to see him standing
in the passageway half

a dozen yards behind her, with his surgeon's knife in one hand and a
bloody handkerchief in

the other.

This was the first sight she had of him head to foot, and the burden of
Pivot shards he

carried was apparent. He looked utterly maladroit, his shoulders

mismatched and his left leg

turned inward, as though a shattered bone had been badly set.

“What's in there?” he said, hobbling towards her. “Is this your friend?”

“I suggest you keep your distance,” she said.

He ignored her. “Did Roxborough wall something up? Look at those things! Is it an Oviate?”

“No.”

“What then? Godolphin never told me about this.”

“He didn't know.”

“But you did?” he said, glancing back at her as he advanced to study the cords, which were

emerging all the time. “I'm impressed. We've both kept our little secrets, haven't we?”

One of the cords reared suddenly from the rubble, and he jumped back, the handkerchief

dropping from his hand. It unfolded as it fell, and the piece of Oscar's flesh Dowd had

wrapped in it landed in the dirt. It was vestigial, but she knew it well enough. He'd cut off

the curiosity and carried it away as a keepsake.

She let out a moan of disgust. Dowd started to stoop to pick it up, but her rage—which

she'd concealed for Celes—tine's sake—erupted.

“You scumbag!” she said, and went at him with both hands raised above her head, locked

into a single fist.

He was heavy with shards and couldn't rise fast enough to avoid her blow. She struck the

back of his neck, a clout that probably hurt her more than him, but unbalanced a body

already too asymmetrical for its own good. He stumbled, prey to gravity, and sprawled in the

rubble. He knew his indignity, and it enraged him.

“Stupid cow!” he said. “Stupid, sentimental cow! Pick it up! Go on, pick it up! Have it if you

want to.”

“I don't want it.”

“No, I insist It's a gift, brother to sister.”

“I'm not your sister! I never was and I never will be!”

Mites were appearing from his mouth as he lay on the rubble, some of them grown fat as

cockroaches on the power he carried in his skin. Whether they were for her benefit or to

protect him against the presence in the wall she didn't know, but seeing them she took a

step away from him.

“I'm going to forgive you this,” he said, all magnanimity. “You're overwrought, I know.” He

raised his arm. “Help me up,” he said. “Tell me you're sorry, and it's forgotten.”

“I loathe everything you are,” she said.

Despite the mites, it was self-preservation that made her speak, not courage. This was a

place of power. The truth would serve her better here than a lie, however politic.

He withdrew his arm and started to haul himself up. As he did so she took two steps

forward and, picking up the bloodied handkerchief, claimed with it the last of Oscar. As she

stoofl up again, almost guilty at what she'd done, she caught sight of a motion in the wall. A

pale form had appeared against the darkness of the cell, as ripe and rounded a form as the

wall that framed it was ragged. Celestine was floating, or rather was borne up as Quaisoir

had been borne up, on ribbons of flesh, the filaments that had once smothered her clinging

to her limbs like the remnants of a coat and draped around her head as a living hood. The

face beneath was delicately boned, but severe, and what beauty it might have possessed was

spoiled by the dementia that burned in it. Dowd was still in the process of rising and turned

to follow Jude's astonished gaze. When he set eyes on the apparition his body failed him, and

he fell back onto the rubble, belly down. From his mite-spawning mouth came one terrified

word.

“Celestine?”

The woman had approached the limits of her cell and now raised her hands to touch the

bricks that had sealed her in for so long. Though she merely brushed them, they seemed to

flee her fingers, tumbling down to join the rest, There was ample room for her to emerge,

but she hung back and spoke from the shadows, her pupils flicking back and forth

maniacally, her lips curling back from her teeth as though in rehearsal for some ghastly

revelation. She matched Dowd's single utterance with a word of her own: "Dowd."

"Yes ..." he murmured, "it's me," So he'd been honest in some part of his biography at least,

Jude thought. She knew him, just as he'd claimed to know her.

"Who did this to you?" he said.

"Why ask me," Celestine said, "when you were part of the plot?" In her voice was the same

mingling of lunacy and composure her body exhibited, her mellifluous tones accompanied by

a fluttering that was almost a second voice, speaking in tandem with the first.

"I didn't know, I swear," Dowd said. He craned his heavy head to appeal to Jude. "Tell her,"

he said.

Celestine's oscillating gaze rose to Jude. "You?" she said. "Did you conspire against me?"

"No," Jude said. "I'm the one who freed you."

"I freed myself."

"But I began it," Jude said.

"Come closer. Let me see you better."

Jude hesitated to approach, with Dowd's face still a nest of mites. But Celestine made her

demand again, and Jude obeyed. The woman raised her head as she approached, turning it

this way and that, perhaps to coax her torpid muscles back into life.

"Are you Roxborough's woman?" she said.

“No.”

“That's close enough,” she told Jude. “Who's then? Which one of them do you belong to?”

“I don't belong to any of them,” Jude said. “They're all dead.”

“Even Roxborough?”

“He's been gone two hundred years.”

At last the eyes stopped flickering, and their stillness, now it came, was more distressing

than their motion. She had a gaze that could slice steel.

“Two hundred years,” she said. It wasn't a question, it was an accusation. And it wasn't

Jude she was accusing, it was Dowd. “Why didn't you come for me?”

“I thought you were dead and gone,” he told her.

“Dead? No. That would have been a kindness. I bore His child. I raised it for a time. You

knew this.”

“How could I? It was none of my business.”

“You made me your business,” she said. “The day you took me from my life and gave me to

God. I didn't ask for that, and I didn't want it—”

“I was just a servant.”

“Dog, more like. Who's got your leash now? This woman?”

“I serve nobody.”

“Good. Then you can serve me.”

“Don't trust him,” Jude said.

“Who, would you prefer I trust?” Celestine replied, not deigning to look at Jude. “You? I

don't think so. You've got blood on your hands, and you smell of coitus.”

These last words were tinged with such disgust Jude couldn't stem her retort. “You

wouldn't be awake if I hadn't found you.”

“Consider your freedom to go from this place my thanks,” Celestine replied. “You wouldn't

wish to know my company for very long.”

Jude didn't find that difficult to believe. After all the months she'd waited for this meeting,

there were no revelations to be had here: only Celestine's insanity and the ice of her rage.

Dowd, meanwhile, was getting to his feet. As he did so, one of the woman's ribbons

unfurled itself from the shadows and reached towards him. Despite his earlier protests, he

made no attempt to avoid it. A suspicious air of humility had come over him. Not only did he

put up no resistance, he actually proffered his hands to Celestine for binding, placing them

pulse to pulse. She didn't scorn his offer. The ribbon of her flesh wrapped itself around his

wrists, then tightened, tugging at him to haul him up the incline of brick.

“Be careful,” Jude warned her. “He's stronger than he looks.”

“It's all stolen.” Celestine replied, “His tricks, his decorums, his power. None of it belongs

to him. He's an actor. Aren't you?”

As if in acquiescence, Dowd bowed his head. But as he did so he dug

his heels into the

rubble and refused to be drawn any further. Jude started to voice a second warning; but

before it was out of her mouth, his fingers closed around the flesh and pulled hard. Caught

unawares, Celestine was dragged against the raw edge of the hole, and before the rest of her

filaments could come to her aid Dowd had raised his wrists above his head and casually

snapped the flesh that bound them. Celestine let out a howl of pain and retreated into the

sanctuary of her cell, trailing the severed ribbon.

Dowd gave her no respite, however, but went in instant pursuit, yelling to her as he

shambled up over the heaped rubble, "I'm not your slave! I'm not your dog! And you're no

fucking Goddess! You're a whore!"

Then he was gone into the darkness of the cell, roaring. Jude ventured a few steps closer to

the hole, but the combatants had retreated into its recesses, and she saw nothing of their

struggle. She heard it, however: the hiss of breaths expelled in pain; the sound of bodies

pitched against the stone. The walls shook, and books all along the passageway were thrown

from their shelves, the tide of power snatching loose sheets and pamphlets up into the air

like birds in a hurricane, leaving the heavier tomes to thrash on the ground, broken-backed.

And then, suddenly, it was over. The commotion in the cell ceased utterly, and there were

several seconds of motionless hush, broken by a moan and the sight of a hand reaching out

of the murk to clutch at the broken wall. A moment later Dowd stumbled into view, his other

hand clamped to his face. Though the shards he carried were powerful, the flesh they were

seated in was weak, and Celestine had exploited that frailty with the efficiency of a warrior.

Half his face was missing, stripped to the bone, and his body was more unknitted than the

corpse he'd left on the table above: his abdomen gaping, his limbs battered.

He fell as he emerged. Rather than attempting to get to his feet—which she doubted he was

capable of doing—he crawled over the rubble like a blind man, his hands feeling out the

wreckage ahead. Sobs came from him now and then, and whimpers, but the effort of escape

was quickly consuming what little strength he had, and before he reached clear ground his

noises gave out. So, a little time after, did he. His arms folded beneath him, and he collapsed,

face to the floor, surrounded by twitching books.

Jude watched his body for a count of ten, then moved back towards the cell. As she came

within two yards of his body, she saw a motion and froze in her tracks. There was life in him

still, though it wasn't his. The mites were exiting his open mouth, like fleas hastening from a

cooling host. They came from his nostrils, too, and from his ears. Without his will to direct

them they were probably harmless, but she wasn't going to test that notion. She stepped as

wide of them as she could, taking an indirect route up over the rubble to the threshold of

Celestine's asylum.

The shadows were much thickened by the dust that danced in the air, an aftermath of the

forces that had been unleashed inside. But Celestine was visible, lying crookedly against the

far wall. He'd done her harm, no doubt of that. Her pale skin was seared and ruptured at

thigh, flank, and shoulder. Roxborough's purgative zeal still had some jurisdiction in his

tower, Jude thought. She'd seen three apostates laid low in the space of an hour one above

and two below:

Of them all, his prisoner Celestine seemed to have suffered least. Wounded though she

was, she still had the will to turn her fierce eyes in Jude's direction and say, "Have you come

to crow?"

"I tried to warn you," Jude said. "I don't want us to be enemies, Celestine. I want to help

you."

"On whose command?"

"On my own. Why'd you assume everybody's a slave or a whore or somebody's damn dog?"

"Because that's the way the world is," she said.

"It's changed, Celestine."

“What? Are the humans gone then?”

“It's not human to be a slave.”

“What would you know?” the woman said. “I don't sniff much humanity in you. You're

some kind of pretender, aren't you? Made by a Maestro.”

It would have pained Jude to hear such dismissal from any source, but from this woman,

who'd been for so long a beacon of hope and healing, it was the bitterest condemnation.

She'd fought so hard to be more than a fake, forged in a manmade womb. But with a few

words Celestine had reduced her to a mirage.

“You're not even natural,” she said.

“Nor are you,” Jude snapped back.

“But I was once,” Celestine said. “And I cling to that.”

“Cling all you like, it won't change the facts. No natural woman could have survived in here

for two centuries.”

“I had my revenge to nourish me.”

“On Roxborough?”

“On them all, all except one.”

“Who?”

“The Maestro... Sartori.”

“You knew him?”

“Too little,” Celestine said.

There was a weight of sorrow here Jude didn't comprehend, but she

had the means to

ameliorate it on her tongue, and for all Celestine's cruelties Jude wasn't about to withhold

the news.

"Sartori isn't dead," she said.

Celestine had turned her face to the wall, but now looked back at Jude. "Not dead?"

"I'll find him for you if you want," Jude said.

"You'd do that?"

"Yes."

"Are you his mistress?"

"Not exactly."

"Where is he? Is he near?"

"I don't know where he is. Somewhere in the city."

"Yes. Fetch him. Please, fetch him." She hauled herself up the wall.

"He doesn't know my

name, but I know him."

"So who shall I tell him you are?"

"Ask him ... ask him if he remembers Nisi Nirvana."

"Who?"

"Just tell him."

"Nisi Nirvana?"

"That's right."

Jude stood up and returned to the hole in the wall, but as she was about to step out

Celestine recalled her.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Judith."—"Well, Judith, not only do you stink of coitus, but you have in your hand some

piece of flesh which you haven't given up clutching. Whatever it is, let it go."

Appalled, Jude looked down at her hand. The curiosity was still in her possession, half

hanging from her fist. She pitched it away, into the dust.

"Do you wonder I took you for a whore?" Celestine remarked.

"Then we've both made mistakes," Jude replied, looking back at her. "I thought you were

my salvation."

"Yours was the greater error," Celestine replied.

Jude didn't grace this last piece of spite with a reply but headed out of the cell. The mites

that had exited Dowd's body were still crawling around aimlessly, looking for a new

bolthole, but the flesh they'd vacated had upped and gone. She wasn't altogether surprised.

Dowd was an actor to his core. He would postpone his farewell scene as long as possible, in

the hope that he'd be at center stage when the final curtain fell. A hopeless ambition, given

the fame of his fellow players, and one Jude wasn't foolish enough to share. The more she

learned about the drama unfolding around her, with its roots in the tale of Christos the

Reconciler, the more resigned she was to having little or no role in it. Like the Fourth Magi,

expunged from the Nativity, she wasn't wanted in the Gospel about to be written; and having

seen the pitiful place a king's testament had come to, she was not about to waste time

writing her own.

Clem's duties were done for the night. He'd been out since seven the previous evening,

about the same business that took him out every night: the shepherding of those among the

city's homeless too frail or too young to survive long on its streets with only concrete and

cardboard for a bed. Midsummer Night was only two days away, and the hours of darkness

were short and relatively balmy, but there were other stalkers besides the cold that preyed

on the weak—all human—and the work of denying them their quarry took him through the

empty hours after midnight and left him, as now, exhausted, but too full of feeling to lay

down his head and sleep. He'd seen more human misery in the three months he'd been

working with the homeless than in the four decades preceding that. People living in the

extremes of deprivation within spitting distance of the city's most conspicuous symbols of

justice, faith, and democracy: without money, without hope, and many (these the saddest)

without much left of their sanity. When he returned home after these nightly treks, the hole

left in him by Taylor's passing not filled but at least forgotten for a while, it was with

expressions of such despair in his head that his own, met in the mirror, seemed almost

blithe.

Tonight, however, he lingered in the dark city longer than usual. Once the sun was up he

knew he'd have little or no chance of sleeping, but sleep was of little consequence to him at

the moment. It was two days since he'd had the visitation that had sent him to Judy's

doorstep with tales of angels, and since then there'd been no further hint of Taylor's

presence. But there were other hints, not in the house but out here in the streets, that

powers were abroad which his dear Taylor was just one sweet part of.

He'd had evidence of this only a short time ago. Just after midnight a man called Tolland,

apparently much feared among the fragile communities that gathered to sleep under the

bridges and in the stations of Westminster, had gone on a rampage in Soho. He'd wounded

two alcoholics in a back street, their sole offense to be in his path when his temper flowed.

Clem had witnessed none of this, but had arrived after Tolland's arrest to see if he could

coax from the gutter some of those whose beds and belongings had been demolished. None

would go with him, however, and in the course of his vain persuasions one of the numb er, a

woman he'd never seen without tears on her face until now, had smiled at him and said he

should stay out in the open with them tonight rather than hiding in his bed, because the

Lord was coming, and it would be the people on the streets who saw Him first. Had it not

been for Taylor's fleeting reappearance in his life, Clem would have dismissed the woman's

blissful talk, but there were too many imponderables in the air for him to ignore the vaguest

signpost to the miraculous. He'd asked the woman what Lord this was that was coming, and

she'd replied, quite sensibly, that it didn't matter. Why should she care what Lord it was, she

said, as long as He came?

Now it was an hour before dawn, and he was trudging across Waterloo Bridge because

he'd heard the psychopathic Tolland had usually kept to the South Bank and something odd

must have happened to drive him across the river. A faint clue, to be sure, but enough to

keep Clem walking, though hearth and pillow lay in the opposite direction.

The concrete bunkers of the South Bank complex had been a favorite bete grise of Taylor's,

their ugliness railed against whenever the subject of contemporary architecture came up in

conversation. The darkness presently concealed their drab, stained facades, but it also

turned the maze of underpasses and walkways around them into terrain no bourgeois would

tread for fear of his life or his wallet. Recent experience had taught Clem to ignore such

anxieties. Warrens such as this usually contained individuals more aggressed against than

aggressive, souls whose shouts were defenses against imagined enemies and whose tirades,

however terrifying they might seem emerging from shadow, usually dwindled into tears.

In fact, he'd not heard a whisper from the murk as he descended from the bridge. The

cardboard city was visible where its suburbs spilled out into the meager lamplight, but the

bulk of it lay under cover of the walkways, out of sight and utterly quiet. He began to suspect

that the lunatic Tolland was not the only tenant who'd left his plot to travel north and,

stooping to peer into the boxes on the outskirts, had that suspicion confirmed. He headed

into shadow, fishing his pencil torch from his pocket to light the way. There was the usual

detritus on the ground: spoiled scraps of food, broken bottles, vomit stains. But the boxes,

and the beds of newspaper and filthy blankets they contained, were empty. More curious

than ever, he wandered on through the rubbish, hoping to find a soul here too weak or too

crazy to leave, who could explain this migration. But he passed through the city without

finding a single occupant, emerging into what the planners of this concrete hell had designed

as a children's playground. All that remained of their good intentions were the grimy bones

of a slide and a jungle gym. The paving beyond them, however, was covered in fresh color,

and advancing to the spot Clem found himself in the middle of a kitsch exhibition: crude

chalk copies of movie-star portraits and glamour girls everywhere underfoot.

He ran the beam over the ground, following the trail of images. It led him to a wall, which

was also decorated, but by a very different hand. Here was no mere copyist's work. This

image was on such a grand scale Clem had to play his torch beam back and forth across it to

grasp its splendor. A group of philanthropic muralists had apparently taken it upon

themselves to enliven this underworld, and the result was a dream landscape, its sky green,

with streaks of brilliant yellow, the plain beneath orange and red. Set on the sands, a walled

city, with fantastical spires.

The torch beam caught a glint off the paint, and Clem approached the wall to discover that

the muralists had only recently left off their labors. Patches of the paint were still tacky.

Seen at close quarters, the rendering was extremely casual, almost slapdash. Barely more

than half a dozen marks had been used to indicate the city and its towers, and only a single

snaking stroke to show the highway running from the gates. Moving his beam off the picture

to illuminate the way ahead, Clem realized why the muralists had been so haphazard. They

had been at work on every available wall, creating a parade of brightly colored images, many

of which were far stranger than the landscape with the green sky. To Clem's left was a man

with two cupped hands for a head, lightning jumping between the palms; to his right a

family of freaks, with fur on their faces. Farther on was an alpine scene, fantasticated by the

addition of several naked women, hovering above the snows; beyond it a skull-strewn veldt,

with a distant train belching smoke against a dazzling sky; and beyond that again, an island

set in the middle of a sea disturbed by a single wave, in the foam of which a face could be

discovered. AH were painted with the same passionate haste as the first, which fact lent

them the urgency of sketches and added to their power. Perhaps it was his exhaustion, or

simply the bizarre setting for this exhibition, but Clem found himself oddly moved by the

images. There was nothing ingratiating or sentimental about them. They were glimpses into

the minds of strangers, and he was exhilarated to find such wonders there.

With his gaze following the journey of pictures, he'd lost all sense of his own direction, but

when he turned out his torch to look for the lamplight he saw a small fire burning up ahead,

and in lieu of any other beacon he made his way towards it. The fire makers had occupied a

small garden laid amid the concrete. It had perhaps once boasted a rose bed or flowering

shrubs; benches, perhaps, dedicated to some dead city father. But now there was only a

pitiful lawn, which barely greened the dirt it peered from. Gathered upon it were the tenants

of the cardboard city, or some part of their number. Most were asleep, bundled up in their

coats and blankets. But five or six were awake, standing around the fire and passing a

cigarette between them as they talked.

A dreadlocked black squatted on the low wall beside the garden's gate and, spotting Clem,

rose to guard the entrance. Clem didn't retreat. There was no threat visible in the man's

posture, nor anything but calm in the garden beyond. The sleepers did so quietly, their

dreams seemingly kind. And the debaters around the fire spoke in whispers. When they

laughed, which they did now and then, it wasn't the hard, desperate noise he'd heard among

these clans, but light.

"Who are you, man?" the black asked him.

"My name's Clem. I got lost."

"You don't look like you been sleepin' rough, man."

"I haven't."

"So why you here?"

"Like I said: I got lost."

The man shrugged. "Waterloo Station's over in that direction," he said, pointing roughly

back the way Clem had come. "But you got a long wait for the first train." He caught Clem's

glance into the garden. "Sorry, man, you can't come in. If you got a bed, go to it."

Clem didn't move, however. Something about one of the men at the fire, standing with his

back to the gate, rooted him to the spot.

"Who is that, who's talking now?" he asked the guard.

The man glanced around. "That's the Gentile," he said.

"The Gentile?" he said. "Surely you mean Gentle."

He hadn't raised his voice in order to name the man, but the syllables must have carried on

the tranquil air, because as they went from Clem's lips the speaker stopped talking and

slowly turned towards the gate. With the fire burning at his back his features were hard to

make out, but Clem knew he'd made no error. The man turned back to his fellow debaters

and said something to them Clem didn't catch. Then he left their fire and walked down to the

gate.

"Gentle?" his visitor said. "It's Clem."

The black stood aside, opening the gate to let the man he'd called the Gentile step out of

the garden. There he stood and studied the stranger.

"Do I know you?" he said. There was no enmity in his voice, but there was no warmth

either. "I do, don't I?"

"Yes, you do, my friend," Clem replied. "Yes, you do."

They walked together along the river, leaving the sleepers and the fire behind them. The

many changes in Gentle soon became apparent. He was of course far

from certain of who he

was, but there were other changes which were, Clem sensed, profounder still. There was a

plainness about his speech, and about the expression on his face, which was by turns

disturbing and calming. Something of the Gentle he and Taylor had known had gone,

perhaps forever. But something was on its way to being gained in its place, and Clem wanted

to be there when it was: to be the angel guarding that tender self.

“Did you paint the pictures?” he asked.

“With my friend Monday,” Gentle said. “We made them together.”

“I never saw you paint anything like that before.”

“They're places I've been,” Gentle told him, “and people I've known. They start coming

back to me when I've got the colors. But it's slow. There's so much filling my head”— he put

his fingers to his brow, which bore a series of ill-healed lacerations —“confusing me. You call

me Gentle, but I've got other names.”

“John Zacharias?”

“That's one. Then there's a man in me called Joseph Bellamy, and another called Michael

Morrison, and one called Almoth, and one called Fitzgerald, and one called Sartori. They all

seem to be me, Clem. But that's not possible, is it? I asked Monday, and Carol, and Irish, and

they said people have two names, sometimes three, but never ten.”

“Maybe you've lived other lives, Gentle, and you're remembering

them.”

“If that's true, I don't want to remember. It hurts too much. I can't think straight. I want to

be one man with one life. I want to know where I begin and where I end, instead of going on

and on.”

“Why's that so terrible?” Clem said, genuinely unable to see the horror in such expansion.

“Because I'm afraid there'll be no end to it,” Gentle replied. He spoke steadily, like a

metaphysician who'd reached a precipice and was calmly describing the abyss below for the

benefit of those who couldn't—or wouldn't—be with him there. “I'm afraid I'm joined “to

everything else,” he said. “And then I'm going to be lost. I want to be this man, or that man,

but not every man. If I'm everyone I'm no one, and nothing.”

He stopped his even stride and turned to Clem, putting his hands on Clem's shoulders.

“Who am I?” he said. “Just tell me. If you love me, tell me. Who am I?” “You're my friend.”

It wasn't an eloquent reply, but it was the only one Clem had. Gentle studied his

companion's face for a minute or more, as if calculating the potency of this axiom against his

dread. And slowly, as he scanned Clem's features, a smile plucked at the corners of his

mouth, and tears began to glisten in his eyes.

“You see me, don't you?” he said softly. “Of course I see you.”

"I don't mean with your sight, I mean with your mind. I exist in your head."

"Gear as crystal," Clem said.

That was truer now than it had ever been. Gentle nodded, and his smile spread.

"Somebody else tried to teach me this," he said. "But I didn't understand." He paused,

musings. Then he said, "It doesn't matter what I'm called. Names are nothing. I am what I am

in you." His arms slipped around Clem, into an embrace. "I'm your friend."

He hugged Clem hard, then stood away, the tears clearing.

"Who was it who taught me that?" he wondered. "Judith, maybe?"

He shook his head. "I see her face over and over," he said. "But it wasn't her. It was

somebody who went away." "Was it Taylor?" Clem said. "Do you remember Taylor?"

"He knew me too?" "He loved you."

"Where is he now?"

"That's a whole other story."

"Is it?" Gentle replied. "Or is it all one?"

They walked on along the river, exchanging questions and answers as they went. At

Gentle's request Clem recounted Taylor's story, from life to deathbed, from deathbed to

light, and Gentle in his turn offered what clues he had to the nature of the journey he'd

returned from. Though he could remember very few of the details, he knew that unlike

Taylor's it had not taken him into brightness. He'd lost many friends along the way—their

names mingled with those of the lives he'd lived—and seen the deaths of many others. But

he'd also witnessed the wonders he'd painted on the walls. Sunless skies that shimmered

green and gold; a palace of mirrors, like Versailles; vast, mysterious deserts and ice

cathedrals full of bells. Listening to these traveler's tales, the vistas of hitherto unknown

worlds spreading in all directions, Clem felt his earlier ease with the notion of an unbounded

self, going into some limitless adventure, falter. The very divisions he'd happily tried to

persuade Gentle from at the outset of this report looked tempting now. But they were a trap,

and he knew it. Their comfort would smother and hobble him eventually. He had to

unburden himself of his old, stale ways of thinking if he was to travel alongside this man

into places where dead souls were light and being was a function of thought.

"Why did you come back?" he asked Gentle after a time.

"I wish I knew," Gentle replied.

"We should find Judith. I think maybe she knows more about this than either of us."

"I don't want to leave these people, Clem. They took me in."

"I understand that," Clem said. "But Gentle, they can't help you now. They don't understand

what's going on."

“Nor do we,” Gentle reminded him. “But they listened when I told my story. They watched

me paint, and they asked me questions, and when I told them the visions I'd had they didn't

mock me.” He stopped and pointed over the river towards the Houses of Parliament. “The

lawgivers'll be coming there soon,” he said. “Would you trust what I just told you to them? If

we said to them that the dead come back in sunlight and there are worlds where the sky's

green and gold, what would they say?” “They'd say we were crazy.”

“Yes, And throw us into the gutter with Monday and Carol and Irish and all the rest.”

“They're not in the gutter because they had visions, Gentle,” Clem said. “They're there

because they've been abused, or they've abused themselves.”

“Which means they can't cover their despair the way the rest can. They've got no

distractions from their pain. So they get drunk and crazy, and the next day they're even

more lost than they were the day before. But I'd still rather trust them than all the bishops

and the ministers. Maybe they're naked, but isn't that a holy state?”

“It's also a vulnerable one,” Clem pointed out. “You can't drag them into this war.”

“Who said there's going to be a war?” “Judith,” Clem replied. “But even if she hadn't, it's in

the air.”

“Does she know who the enemy's going to be?” “No. But it'll be a hard

battle, and if you

care for these people you won't put them in the front line. They'll be there when the war's

over.”

Gentle pondered this for a time. Finally, he said, “So they'll be the peacemakers.”

“Why not? They can spread the good news.”

Gentle nodded. “I like that,” he said. “And so will they.”

“So shall we go and find Judith?”

“I think that'd be wise. But first, I have to say goodbye.”

The day came with them as they retraced their steps along the bank, and by the time they

reached the underpass the shadows were no longer black but gray-blue. Some of the beams

had found their way through the concrete bridges and barricades and were edging towards

the threshold of the garden.

“Where did you go?” Irish said, meeting his Gentile at the gate. “We thought you'd slipped

away.”

“I want you to meet a friend of mine,” Gentle said. “This is Clem. Clem, this is Irish; this is

Carol and Benedict. Where's Monday?”

“Asleep,” said Benedict, the sometime guard.

“What's Clem short for?” Carol asked.

“Clement.”

“I've seen you before,” she said. “Didn't you used to bring round soup? You did, didn't you?”

I never forget faces.”

Gentle led the way through the gate and into the garden. The fire was almost out, but there

were enough embers to thaw chilled fingers. He squatted down beside the fire and poked at

it with a stick to stir some flame, beckoning Clem to warm himself. But as Clem bent to do so

he stopped.

“What is it?” Gentle said.

Clem's eyes went from the fire to the bundled forms still slumbering all around: twenty or

more, still lost in dreams, though the light was creeping over them.

“Listen,” he said.

One of the sleepers was laughing, so softly it was barely audible.

“Who is that?” Gentle said. The sound was contagious and brought a smile to his face.

“It's Taylor,” Clem said.

“There's no one here called Taylor,” Benedict said.

“Well, he's here,” Clem replied.

Gentle stood up and scanned the sleepers. In the far corner of the garden Monday was

lying flat on his back, with a blanket barely covering his paint-spattered clothes. A beam of

morning light had found its straight, bright way between the concrete pillars and was settled

on his chest, catching his chin and his pale lips. As if its gilding tickled, he laughed in his

sleep.

“That's the boy who made the paintings with me,” Gentle said.

“Monday,” Clem remembered.

“That's right.”

Clem picked his way through the dormitory to the youth's side. Gentle followed, but before

he reached the sleeper the laughter faded. Monday's smile lingered, however, the sun

catching the blond hairs on his upper lip. His eyes didn't open, but when he spoke it was as if

he saw.

“Look at you, Gentle,” he said. “The traveler returned. No, I'm impressed, really I am.”

It wasn't quite Taylor's voice—the larynx shaping it was twenty years too young—but the

cadences were his; so was the sly warmth.

“Clem told you I was hanging around, I presume.”

“Of course,” Clem said.

“Strange times, eh? I used to say I'd been born into the wrong age. But it looks as though I

died into the right one. So much to gain. So much to lose.”

“Where do I begin?” Gentle said.

“You're the Maestro, Gentle, not me.”

“Maestro, am I?”

“He's still remembering, Tay,” Clem explained.

“Well, he should be quick about it,” Taylor said. “You've had your holiday, Gentle. Now

you've got some healing to do. There's a hell of a void waiting to take

us all if you fuck up.

And if it comes”—the smile went from Monday's face—“if it comes there won't be any more

spirits in the light, because there won't be any light. Where's your familiar, by the way?”

“Who?”

“The mystif.”

Gentle's breath quickened.

“You lost it once, and I went looking for it. I found it too, mourning its children. Don't you

remember?” ‘ “Who was this?” Clem asked.

“You never met it,” Taylor said. “If you had, you'd remember.”

“I don't think Gentle does,” Clem said, looking at the Maestro's troubled face.

“Oh, the mystifs in there somewhere,” Taylor said. “Once seen, never forgotten. Go on,

Gentle. Name it for me. It's on the tip of your tongue.”

Gentle's expression became pained.

“It's the love of your life, Gentle,” Taylor said, coaxing Gentle on.

“Name it. I dare you.

Name it.”

Gentle frowned and mouthed silence. But finally his throat gave up its hostage. “Pie ...” he

murmured.

Taylor smiled through Monday's face. “Yes... ?”

“Pie 'oh' pah.”

“What did I tell you? Once seen, never forgotten.”

Gentle said the name again and again, breathing it as though the

syllables were an

incantation. Then he turned to Clem.

"That lesson I never learned," he said. "It came from Pie."

"Where's the mystif now?" Taylor asked. "Do you have any idea?"

Gentle went down on his haunches beside Tay's sleeping host. "Gone," he said, closing his

hands around the sunlight.

"Don't do that," Taylor said softly. "You only catch the dark that way." Gentle opened his

hand again and let the light lie on his palm. "You say the mystifs gone?" Tay went on.

"Where, for God's sake? How can you lose it twice?"

"It went into the First Dominion," Gentle replied. "It died and went where I couldn't

follow."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"But I'll see it again, when I've done my work," Gentle said.

"Finally, we get to it," Tay said.

"I'm the Reconciler," Gentle said. "I've come to open the Dominions ..."

"So you have, Maestro," Tay said.

"... on Midsummer Night."

"You're cutting it fine," Clem said. "That's tomorrow."

"It can be done," Gentle said, standing up again. "I know who I am now. He can't hurt me

any more."

"Who can't?" Clem asked.

"My enemy," Gentle replied, turning his face into the sunlight.
"Myself."

After only a few days in this city that enemy, the sometime Autarch Sartori, had begun

yearning for the languid dawns and elegaic dusks of the Dominion he'd left. The day came

altogether too quickly here and was snuffed out with, the same alacrity. That would have to

change. Among his plans for the New Yzordderrex would be a palace made of mirrors, and of

glass made possessive by feits, that would hold the glory of these inkling dawns and protract

them, so that they met the glow of dusk coming in other directions. Then he might be happy

here.

There would be, he knew, little in the way of resistance to his taking of the Fifth, to judge

by the ease with which the members of the Tabula Rasa had succumbed to him. All but one

of them was now dead, cornered in their burrows like rabid vermin. Not one had detained

him more than minutes; they had given up their lives quickly, with few sobs and still fewer

prayers. He wasn't surprised. Their ancestors had been strong-willed men, but even the

most pungent blood thinned over generations, and the children of their children of their

children (and so on) were faithless cowards.

The only surprise he'd had in this Dominion, and it was a sweet one, was the woman whose

bed he was returning to: the peerless and eternal Judith. His first taste of her had been in

Quaisoir's chambers when, mistaking her for the woman he'd married, he'd made love to her

on the bed of veils. Only later, as he'd prepared to quit Yzordderrex, had Rosengarten

informed him of Quaisoir's maiming and gone on to report the presence of a doppelgSnger in

the corridors of the palace. That report had been Rosengarten's last as a loyal commander.

When, a few minutes later, he'd been ordered to join his Autarch on the journey to the Fifth,

he'd unconditionally refused. The Second was his home, he said, and Yzordderrex his pride,

and if he was to die then he wanted it to be in sight of the comet. Tempted as he was to

punish the man for this dereliction of duty, Sartori had no desire to enter his new world

with blood on his hands. He'd let the man go and departed for the Fifth, believing the woman

he'd made love to on Quaisoir's bed was somewhere in the city behind him. But no sooner

had he taken up the mask of his brother's life than he'd met her again, in Klein's garden of

scentless flowers.

He never ignored omens, good or bad. Judith's reappearance in his life was a sign that they

belonged together, and it seemed that she, all unknowing, felt the same. Here was the

woman for the love of whom this whole sorry catalogue of death and desolation had been

started, and in her company he felt himself renewed, as though the sight of her reminded his

cells of the self he'd been before his fall. He was being offered a second chance: an

opportunity to start again with the creature he'd loved and make an empire that would

erase all memory of his previous failure. He'd had proof of their compatibility when they'd

made love. A more perfect welding of erotic impulses he could scarcely have imagined. After

it, he'd gone out into the city about the business of murder with more vigor than ever.

It would take time, of course, to persuade her that this was a marriage decreed by fate. She

believed him to be his other and would be vengeful when he disabused her of this fiction.

But he would bring her around in time. He had to. He had intimations, even in this blithe

city, of intolerable things: whispers of oblivion that made the foulest Oviates he'd ever

dredged up look alluring. She could save him from that, lick off his sweats and rock him to

sleep. He had no fear that she'd reject him. He had a claim on her that would make her put

aside all moral niceties: his child, planted in her two nights before.

It was his first. Though he and Quaisoir had attempted to found a dynasty many times,

she'd repeatedly miscarried, then later corrupted her body with so much kreauchee it

refused to produce another egg. But this Judith was a wonder. Not only had she made

surpassing love with him, there was fruit from that coupling. And when the time came to tell

her (once the irksome Oscar Godolphin was dead, and the line for whom she'd been made

stopped), then she would see the perfection of their union and feel it, kicking in her womb.

Jude hadn't slept, waiting for Gentle to return from another night of wanderings. The

summons she carried from Celestine was too heavy to sleep with; she wanted it said and

done, so she could put her thoughts of the woman away. Nor did she want to be unconscious

when he returned. The idea of his coming in and watching her sleep, which would have been

comforting two nights before, unsettled her now. He was the egg licker, and its thief. When

she had her possession back and he was gone off to Highgate, she'd rest, but not before.

The day was creeping up when he finally returned, but there was insufficient light for her

to read much on his face until he was within a few yards of her, by which time he was

wreathed in smiles. He chastised her fondly for waiting up. There was no need, he said; he

was quite safe. The pleasantries stopped here, however. He saw her unease and wanted to

know what was wrong.

"I went to Roxborough's tower," she told him.

"Not on your own, I hope. Those people can't be trusted."

"I took Oscar."

"And how's Oscar?"

She was in no mood to prettify. "He's dead," she said.

He looked genuinely saddened at this. "How did that happen?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter."

"It does to me," he insisted. "Please. I want to know."

"Dowd was there. He killed Godolphin."

"Did he hurt you?"

"No. He tried. But no."

"You shouldn't have gone up there without me. What on earth possessed you?"

She told him, as plainly as she knew: "Roxborough had a prisoner," she said. "A woman he

buried under the tower."

"He kept that little kink to himself," came the reply. She thought there was something

almost admiring in his tone, but she fought the temptation to accuse him. "So you went to

dig up her bones, did you?"

"I went to release her."

Now she had every scrap of his attention. "I don't follow," he said.

"She's not dead."

"So she's not human." He made a curt little smile. "What was Roxborough doing up there?

Raising wantons?"

"I don't know what wantons are."

"They're ethereal whores."

"That doesn't describe Celestine." She trailed the bait of the name, but he failed to bite.

"She's human. Or at least she was."

"And what is she now?"

Jude shrugged. "Something ... else. I don't quite know what. She's powerful, though. She

almost killed Dowd."

"Why?"

"I think you're better off hearing that from her."

"Why should I want to?" he said lightly.

"She asked to see you. She says she knows you."

"Really? Did she say from where?"

"No. But she told me to mention Nisi Nirvana."

He chuckled at this.

"Does it mean something to you?" Jude said.

"Yes, of course. It's a story for children. Don't you know it?"

"No."

Even as she spoke, she realized why, but it was he who voiced the reason. ,

"Of course you don't," he said. "You were never a child, were you?"

She studied his face, wishing she could be certain he meant to be cruel.

"So will you go to her?"

"Why should I? I don't know her."

"But she knows you."

“What is this?” he said. “Are you trying to palm me off on another woman?”

He took a step towards her, and though she tried to conceal her reluctance to be touched,

she failed.

“Judith,” he said. “I swear I don't know this Celestine. It's you I think about when I'm not

here—”

“I don't want to discuss that now.”

“What do you suspect me of?” he said. “I've done nothing. I swear.” He laid both his hands

on his chest. “You're hurting me, Judith. I don't know if that's what you want to do, but you

are. You're hurting me.”

“That's a new experience for you, is it?”

“Is that what this is about? A sentimental education? If it is, I beg you, don't torment me

now. We've got too many enemies to be fighting with each other.”

“I'm not fighting. I don't want to fight.”

“Good,” he said, opening his arms. “So come here.”

She didn't move.

“Judith.”

“I want you to go and see Celestine. I promised her I'd find you, and you'll make a liar of

me if you don't go.”

“All right, I'll go,” he said. “But I'm going to come back, love, you can depend on that.”

Whoever she is, whatever she looks like, it's you I want." He paused.
"Now more than ever,"

he said.

She knew he wanted her to ask him why, and for fully ten seconds she kept her silence

rather than satisfy him. But the look on his face was so brimming she couldn't keep her

curiosity from putting the question on her tongue.

"Why now?" she said.

"I wasn't going to tell you yet..."

"Tell me what?"

"We're going to have a child, Judith."

She stared at him, waiting for some further explanation: that he'd found an orphan on the

street or was bringing a babe from the Dominions. But that wasn't what he meant at all, and

her pounding heart knew it. He meant a child born from the act they'd performed: a

consequence.

"It'll be my first," he said. "Yours too, yes?"

She wanted to call him liar. How could he know when she didn't? But he was quite certain

of his facts.

"He'll be a prophet," he said. "You'll see."

She already had, she realized. She'd entered its tiny life when the egg had plunged her

consciousness down into her own body. She'd seen with its stirring spirit: a jungle city, and

living waters; Gentle, wounded, and coming to take the egg from tiny fingers. Had that

perhaps been the first of its prophecies?

“We made a kind of love no other beings in this Dominion could make,” Gentle was saying.

“The child came from that.”

“You knew what you were doing?”

“I had my hopes.”

“And didn't I get a choice in the matter? I'm just a womb, am I?”

“That's not how it was.”

“A walking womb!”

“You're making it grotesque.”

“It is grotesque.”

“What are you saying? How can anything that comes from us be less than perfection?” He

spoke with almost religious zeal. — T'm changing, sweet. I'm discovering what it is to love,

and cherish, and plan for the future. See how you're changing me?”

“From what? From the great lover to the great father? Another day, another Gentle?”

He looked as though he had an answer on his tongue but bit it back. “We know what we

mean to each other,” he said. “There should be proof of that. Judith, please—” His arms were

still open, but she refused to go into them. “When I came here I said I'd make mistakes, and I

asked you to forgive me if I did. I'm asking you again now.”

She bowed her head and shook it. “Go away,” she said.

"I'll see this woman if you want me to. But before I go, I want you to swear something to

me. I want you to swear you won't try and harm what's in you."

"Go to hell."

"It's not for me. It's not even for the child. It's for you. If you were to do any harm to

yourself because of something I did, my life wouldn't be worth living."

"I'm not going to slit my wrists, if that's what you think."

"It's not that."

"What then?"

"If you try to abort the child, it won't go passively. It's got our purpose in it; it's got our

strength. It'll fight for its life, and it may take yours in the process. Do you understand what

I'm saying?" She shuddered. "Speak to me."

"I've got nothing to say to you that you want to hear. Go talk to Celestine."

"Why don't you come with me?"

"Just... go ... away."

She looked up. The sun had found the wall behind him and was celebrating there. But he

remained in shadow. For all his grand purpose, he was still made to be fugitive: a liar and a

fraud.

"I want to come back," he said.

She didn't answer.

"If you're not here, I'll know what you want from me."

Without a further word he went to the door and let himself out. Only as she heard the front

door slam did she shake herself from her stupor and realize he'd taken the egg with him as

he went. But then like all mirror lovers he was fond of symmetry, and it probably pleased

him to have that piece of her in his pocket, knowing she had a piece of him in a deeper place

still.

Even though Gentle had known the tribe of the South Bank only a few hours, parting from

them wasn't easy. He'd felt more secure in their company for that short time than he'd felt

with many men and women he'd known for years. They, for their part, were used to loss—it

was the theme of almost every life story he'd heard—so there were no histrionics or

accusations, just a heavy silence. Only Monday, whose victimization had first stirred the

stranger from his passivity, made any attempt to have Gentle linger.

"We've only got a few more walls to paint," he said, "and we'll have covered them all. A few

days. A week at the most."

"I wish I had that long," Gentle told him. "But I can't postpone the work I came back to do."

Monday had of course been asleep while Gentle talked with Tay (and had woken much

confounded by the respect he got), but the others, especially Benedict, had new words to

add to the vocabulary of miracles.

"So what does a Reconciler do?" he asked Gentle. "If you're goin' off to the Dominions, man,

we want to be comin' with you."

"I'm not leaving Earth. But if and when I do, you'll be the first to know about it."

"What if we never see you again?" Irish said.

“Then I'll have failed.”

“And you're dead and gone?”

“That's right.”

“He won't fuck up,” Carol said. “Will you, love?”

“But what do we do with what we know?” Irish said, clearly troubled by this burden of

mysteries. “With you gone, it won't make sense to us.”

“Yes, it will,” Gentle said. “Because you'll be telling other people, and that way the stories

will stay alive until the door to the Dominions is open.”

“So we should tell people?”

“Anyone who'll listen.”

There were murmurs of assent from the assembly. Here at least was a purpose, a

connection with the tale they'd heard and its teller.

“If you need us for anything,” Benedict purred, “you know where to find us.”

“Indeed I do,” Gentle said, and went with Clem to the gate.

“And what if anybody comes looking for you?” Carol called after them.

“Tell 'em I was a mad bastard and you kicked me over the bridge.”

This earned a few grins.

“That's what we'll say, Maestro,” Irish said. “But I'm tellin' you, if you don't come back for

us one of these days, we're goin' to come lookin' for you.”

The farewells over, Clem and Gentle headed up onto Waterloo Bridge in search of a cab to

take them across the city to Jude's place. It wasn't yet six, and though the flow of

northbound traffic was beginning to thicken as the first commuters appeared, there were no

taxis to be had, so they started across the bridge on foot in the hope of finding a cab on the

Strand.

"Of all the company to have found you in," Clem remarked as they went, "that has to be the

strangest."

"You came looking for me there," Gentle pointed out, "so you must have had some inkling."

"I suppose I must."

"And believe me, I've kept stranger company. A lot stranger."

"I believe it. I'd like you to tell me about the whole journey one day soon. Will you do

that?"

"I'll do my best. But it'll be difficult without a map. I kept telling Pie I'd draw on e, so that if

I ever passed through the Dominions again and got lost..."

"You'd be found."

"Exactly."

"And did you make a map?"

"No. There was never time, somehow. There always seemed to be something new to

distract me."

"Tell me as much as— Whoa! I see a cab!"

Clem stepped out into the street and waved the vehicle down. They

both got in and Clem

supplied the driver with directions. As he was doing so, the man peered into his mirror.

“Is that someone you know?”

They looked back along the bridge to see Monday pelting towards them. Seconds later the

paint-smeared face was at the taxi window, and Monday was begging to join them.

“You've got to let me come with you, boss. It's not fair if you don't. I gave you my colors,

didn't I? Where would you be without my colors?”

“I can't risk your getting hurt,” Gentle said.

“If I get hurt it's my hurt and it's my fault.”

“Are we going, or what?” the driver wanted to know.

“Let me come, boss. Please.”

Gentle shrugged, then nodded. The grin, which had gone from Monday's face during his

appeal, returned in glory, and he clambered into the cab, rattling his tobacco tin of chalks

like a ju-ju as he did so.

“I brought the colors,” he said, “just in case we need 'em. You never know when we might

have to draw a quick Dominion or something, right?”

Though the journey to Judith's flat was relatively short, there were signs everywhere —

mostly small, but so numerous their sum became significant—that the days of venomous

heat and uncleansing storm were taking their toll on the city and its occupants. There were

vociferous altercations at every other corner, and some in the middle of the street; there

were scowls and furrows on every passing face.

“Tay said there was a void coming,” Clem remarked as they waited at an intersection for

two furious motorists to be stopped from making nooses of each other's neckties. “Is this all

part of it?”

“It's bloody madness is what it is,” the cabbie chimed in. “There's been more murders in

the last five days than in all of last year. I read that somewhere. And it's not just murders,

neither, it's people toppin' themselves. A mate of mine, a cabbie like, was up the Arsenal on

Tuesday and this woman just throws herself in front of his cab. Straight under the front

wheels. Bloody tragic.”

The fighters had finally been refereed and were being escorted to opposite pavements.

“I don't know what the world's coming to,” the cabbie said. “It's bloody madness.”

His piece said, he turned on the radio as the traffic began moving again, and began

whistling 3n out-of-tune accompaniment to the ballad that emerged.

“Is this something we can help stop?” Clem asked Gentle. “Or is it just going to get worse?”

“I hope the Reconciliation will put an end to it. But I can't be certain. This Dominion's been

sealed up for so long, it's poisoned itself with its own shit.”

“So we just have to pull down the sod din' walls,” Monday said, with the glee of a born

demolisher. He rattled his tin of colors again. “You mark 'em,” he said, “and I'll knock 'em

down. Easy.”

The child, Jude had been told, had more purpose in it than most, and she believed it. But

what did that mean, besides the risk of its fury if she tried to unhouse it? Would it grow

faster than others? Would she be big with it by dusk, and her water ready to break before

morning? She lay in the bedroom now, the day's heat already weighing on her limbs, and

hoped the stories she'd heard from radiant mothers were true, that her body would pour

palliatives into her bloodstream to ease the traumas of nurturing and expelling another life.

When the doorbell rang her first instinct was to ignore it, but her visitors, whoever they

were, kept on ringing and eventually began to shout up at the window. One called for Judy;

the other, more oddly, for Jude. She sat up, and for a moment it was as though her anatomy

had shifted. Her heart thumped in her head, and her thoughts had to be dragged up out of

her belly to form the intention to leave the room and go down to the door. The voices were

still summoning her from below, but they petered out as she headed down the stairs, and

she was ready to find the doorstep empty when she got there. Not so. There was an

adolescent there, besmirched with color, who upon sight of her turned and hollered to her

other visitors, who were across the street, peering up at her flat.

"She's here!" he yelled. "Boss? She's here!"

They started back across the road towards the step, and as they came her heart, still

beating in her head, took up a suicidal tempo. She reached out for some support as the man

at Clem's side met her eyes and smiled. This wasn't Gentle. At least it wasn't the egg-thief

Gentle who'd left a couple of hours before, his face flawless. This one hadn't shaved for

several days and had a brow of scabs.

She backed away from the step, her hand failing to find the door though she wanted to

slam it. "Keep away from me," she said.

He stopped a yard or two from the threshold, seeing the panic on her face. The youth had

turned to him, and the imposter signaled that he should retreat, which he did, leaving th e

line of vision between them clear.

"I know.I look like shit," the scabby face said. "But it's me, Jude."

She took two steps back from the blaze in which he stood (How the light liked him! Not like

the other, who'd been in shadow every time she'd set eyes on him), her sinews fluttering

from toes to fingertips, their motion escalating as though a fit was about to seize her. She

reached for the banister and took hold of it to keep herself from falling over.

"It can't be," she said.

This time the man made no reply. It was his accomplice in this deceit
—Clem, of all

people—who said, "Judy. We have to talk to you. Can I come in?"

"Just you," she said. "Not them. Just you."

"Just me."

He came to the door, approaching her slowly, palms out, "What's
happened here?" he said.

"That's not Gentle," she told him. "Gentle's been with me for the last
two days. And nights.

That's... I don't know who."

The imposter heard what she was telling Clem. She could see his face
over the other man's

shoulder, so shocked the words might have been blows. The more she
tried to explain to

Clem what had happened, the more she lost faith with what she was
saying. This Gentle,

waiting outside, was the man she'd left on the studio step, standing
bewildered in the sun as

he was now. And if this was he, then the lover who'd come to her, the
egg licker and

fertilizer, was some other some terrible other.

She saw Gentle make the man's name with his lips: "Sartori,"

Hearing the name and knowing it was true—knowing that the butcher
of Yzordderrex had

found a place in her bed, heart, and womb—the convulsions
threatened to overtake her

completely. But she clung to the solid, sweaty world as best she could,

determined that these

men, his enemies, should know what he'd done.

"Come in," she said to Gentle. "Come in and close the door."

He brought the boy with him, but she didn't have the will to waste on objecting. He also

brought a question: "Did he harm you?"

"No," she said. She almost wished he had, wished he'd given her a glimpse of his atrocious

self. "You told me he was changed, Gentle," she said. "You said he was a monster; he was

corrupted, you said. But he was exactly like you."

She let her rage simmer in her as she spoke, working its alchemy on the abhorrence she

felt and turning it into purer, wiser stuff. Gentle had misled her with his descriptions of his

other, creating in her mind's eye a man so tainted by his deeds he was barely human.

There'd been no malice in his deception; only the desire to be utterly divided from the man

who shared his face. But now he knew his error and was plainly ashamed. He hung back,

watching her while the tremors in her body slowed. There was steel in her sinew and it held

her up, lent her the strength to finish the account. There was no sense in keeping the last

part of Sartori's deceit from either Gentle or Clem. It would be apparent soon enough. She

laid her hand on her belly.

"I'm pregnant," she said. "His child. Sartori's child."

In a more rational world she might have been able to interpret the expression on Gentle's

face as he received the news, but its complexity defied her. There was anger in the maze,

certainly, and bafflement too. But was there also a little jealousy? He hadn't wanted her

company when they'd returned from the Dominions; his mission as Reconciler had scourged

his libido. But now that she'd been touched by his other, pleased by him (did he see that

guilt somewhere on her face, as ineptly buried as his jealousy?) he was feeling pangs of

possessiveness. As ever with their story, there was no sentiment untainted by paradox.

It was Clem, dear comforting Clem, who opened his arms now and said, "Any chance of a

hug?"

"Oh, God, yes," she said. "Every chance."

He crossed to her and wrapped his embrace around her. They rocked together.

"I should have known, Clem," she said, too quietly for Gentle or the boy to hear.

"Hindsight's easy," he said, kissing her hair. "I'm just glad you're alive."

"He never threatened me. He never laid a finger on me that I didn't..."

"Ask for?"

"I didn't need to ask," she said. "He knew."

The sound of the front door reopening made her raise her head from Clem's shoulder.

Gentle was stepping out into the sun again, with the youth following.

Once outside, he

looked up, cupping his hand over his brow to study the sky at his zenith. Seeing him do so,

Jude realized who the sky watcher she'd glimpsed in the Boston Bowl had been. It was a

small solving, but she wasn't about to spurn the satisfaction it provided.

"Sartori is Gentle's brother, is that right?" Clem said. "I'm afraid I'm still hazy on the family

relations."

"They're not brothers, they're twins," she replied. "Sartori is his perfect double."

"How perfect?" Clem asked, looking at her with a small, almost mischievous smile on his

face. "Oh ... very perfect." "So it wasn't so bad, his being here?" She shook her head. "It

wasn't bad at all," she replied. Then, after a moment: "He told me he loved me, Clem." "Oh,

Lord." "And I believed him."

"How many dozens of men have told you that?" "Yes, but he was different...." "Famous last

words."

She looked at the sun watcher for a few seconds, puzzled by the calm that had come over

her. Was the mere memory of his commitment to her enough to assuage every dread? "What

are you thinking?" Clem asked her. "That he feels something Gentle never did," she replied.

"Maybe never could. Before you say it, I know the whole thing's repulsive. He's a destroyer.

He's wiped out whole countries. How can I be feeling anything for him?" "You want the

cliches?" "Tell me."

"You feel what you feel Some people go for sailors, some people go for men in rubber suits

and feather boas. We do what we do. Never explain, never apologize. There. That's all you're

getting."

Her hands went to his face. She cupped it, then kissed it. "You are sublime," she said.

"We're going to survive, aren't we?"

"Survive and prosper," he said. "But I think we'd better find your beau, for everybody's —"

He stopped as her grip on him tightened. All trace of joy had gone from her face.

"What's wrong?"

"Celestine. I sent him up to Highgate. To Roxborough's tower."

"I'm sorry, I'm not following this."

"It's bad news," she said, leaving his embrace and hurrying to the front door.

Gentle relinquished his zenith watching at her summons and returned to the step as she

repeated what she'd just told Clem.

"What's up in Highgate?" he said.

"A woman who wanted to see you. Does the name Nisi Nirvana mean anything to you?"

Gentle puzzled over this for a moment. "It's something from a story," he said.

“No, Gentle. She's real. She's alive. At least she was.”

It hadn't been sentiment alone that had moved the Autarch Sartori to have the streets of

London depicted in such loving detail on the walls of his palace. Though he'd spent only a

little time in this city—no more than weeks, between his birth and his departure for the

Reconciled Dominions— Mother London and Father Thames had educated him right royally.

Of course the metropolis visible from the summit of Highgate Hill, where he stood now, was

vaster and grimmer than the city he'd wandered then, but there were enough signs

remaining to stir some poignant and pungent memories. He'd learned sex in these streets,

from the professionals around Drury Lane. He'd learned murder at the riverside, watching

the bodies washed up in the mud on a Sunday morning after the slaughters of Saturday

night. He'd learned law at Lincoln's Inn Field and seen justice done at Tyburn. All fine

lessons, that had helped to make him the man he was. The only lesson he couldn't remember

learning, whether in these streets or any other, was how to be an architect. He must have

had a tutor in that, he presumed, at some time. After all, wasn't he the man whose vision had

built a palace that would stand in legend, even though its towers were now rubble? Where,

in the furnace of his genes or in his history, was the kindling spark of that genius? Perhaps

he'd only discover the answer in the raising of his New Yzordderrex. If he was patient and

watchful, the face of his mentor would sooner or later appear in its walls. There would have

to be a great demolishing, however, before the foundations were laid, and banalities like the

Tabula Rasa's tower, which he now came in sight of, would be the first to be condemned. He

crossed the forecourt to the front door, whistling as he went and wondering if the wo man

Judith had been so insistent he meet—this Celestine—could hear his trill. The door stood

open, but he doubted any thief, however opportunist, had dared enter. The air around the

threshold fairly pricked with power, putting him in mind of his beloved Pi vot Tower.

Still whistling, he crossed the foyer to a second door and stepped through it into a room he

knew. He'd walked these ancient boards twice in his life: the first time the day before the

Reconciliation, when he'd presented himself to Roxborough here, passing himself off as the

Maestro Sartori for the perverse pleasure of shaking the hands of the Reconciler's patrons

before the sabotage he'd planned took them to Hell; the second time, the night after the

Reconciliation, with storms tearing up the skies from Hadrian's Wall to Land's End. On this

occasion he'd come with Chant, his new familiar, intending to kill Lucius Cobbitt, the boy

he'd made his unwitting agent in the sabotage. Having searched for him in Gamut Street and

found him gone, he'd braved the storm—there were forests uprooted
and lifted in the air,

and a man struck by lightning burning on Highgate Hill—only to
discover that Roxborough's

house was empty. He'd never found Cobbitt. Driven from the safety of
Gamut Street by his

sometime Maestro, the youth had probably fallen prey to the storm, as
so many others had

that night.

Now the room stood silent, and so did he. The lords who'd built this
house, and their

children, who'd raised the tower above, were dead. It was a welcome
hush; in it, the re'd be

time for dalliance. He wandered over to the mantelpiece and headed
down the stairs,

descending into a library he'd never known existed until this moment.
He might have been

tempted to linger, perusing the laden shelves, but the pricking power
he'd— felt at the front

door was stronger than ever and drew him on, more intrigued with
every yard.

He heard the woman's voice before he set eyes on her, emanating from
a place where the

restless dust was so thick it was like walking in a delta fog. Barely
visible through it; a scene

of sheer vandalism: books, scrolls, and manuscripts reduced to shreds
or buried in the

wreckage of the shelves they'd been laid upon. And beyond the rubble,
a hole in the brick;

and from the hole, a call.

“Is that Sartori?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Come closer. Let me see you.”

He presented himself at the bottom of the heap of rubble.

“I thought she'd failed to find you,” Celestine said. “Or else you'd refused to come.”

“How could I refuse a summons like this?” he said softly.

“Do you think this is some kind of liaison?” she replied. “Some secret tryst?”

Her voice was raw with the dust, and bitter. He liked the sound of it. Women who had

anger in them were always so much more interesting than their contented sisters.

“Come in, Maestro,” she said to him. “Let me put you to rights.”

He clambered up over the stones and peered into the darkness. The cell was a wretched

hole, as sordid as anything beneath his palace, but the woman who'd occupied it was no

anchorite. Her flesh hadn't been chastened by incarceration, but looked lush, for all the

marks upon it. The tendrils that clung to her body extolled her fluency, moving over her

thighs and breasts and belly like unctuous snakes. Some clung to her head and paid court at

her honey lips; others lay between her legs in bliss. He felt her tender gaze on him and

luxuriated in it.

“Handsome,” she said.

He took her compliment as an invitation to approach, but as he did so

she made a murmur

of distress, and he stopped in his tracks.

“What's this shadow in you?” she said.

“Nothing to be afraid of,” he told her.

Some of the filaments parted, and longer tendrils, these not courtiers
but part of her

substance, uncurled from behind her, clinging to the rough wall and
hauling her up.

“I've heard that before,” she said. “When a man tells you there's
nothing to be afraid of,

he's lying. Even you, Sartori.”

“I won't come any closer if it bothers you,” he said.

It wasn't respect for the woman's unease that moved him to
compliance, but the sight of

the ribbons that had lifted her. Quaisoir had sprouted such
appendages, he recalled, after

her intimacies with the women of the Bastion of the Banu. They were
evidence of some

facility in the other sex he had no real comprehension of: a remnant of
crafts all but

banished from the Reconciled Dominions by Hapexamendios. Perhaps
they'd seen a new,

poisonous flowering in the Fifth in the time since he'd left. Until he
knew the scope of their

authority, he'd be circumspect,

“I'd like to ask a question, if I may?” he said.

“Yes?”

“How do you know who I am?”

“First, tell me where you've been all these years.”

Oh, the temptation he felt to tell her the truth, then, and parade his achievements in the

hope of impressing her. But he'd come here in the guise of his other, and, as with Judith, he'd

have to choose the moment of his unmasking carefully.

“I've been wandering,” he said. It wasn't so untrue.

“Where?”

“In the Second Dominion, and occasionally the Third.”

“Were you ever in Yzordderrex?”

“Sometimes.”

“And in the desert outside the city?”

“There too. Why do you ask?”

“I was there once. Before you were born.”

“I'm older than I look,” he told her. “I know it doesn't show—”

“I know how long you've lived, Sartori,” she replied. “To the very day.”

Her certainty nourished the discomfort bred by the sight of the tendrils. Could she read his

thoughts, this woman? If so—if she knew what he was and all he'd done—why wasn't she in

awe of him?

There was no profit in pretending that he didn't care that she seemed to know so much.

Plainly but politely, he asked her how, preparing as he spoke a profusion of excuses if she

was simply one of the Maestr's casual conquests and accused him of

forgetting her. But the

accusation, when it came, was of another kind entirely.

“You've done great harm in your life, haven't you?” she said to him.

“No more than most,” he protested mildly. “I've been tempted to a few excesses, certainly.

But then hasn't everybody?”

“A few excesses?” she said. “I think you've done more than that. There's evil in you, Sartori.

I smell it in your sweat, the way I smelled coitus in the woman.”

Her mention of Judith—who else could this venereal woman be? — reminded him of the

prophecy he'd made to her two nights before. They would find darkness in each other, he'd

said; and that was a perfectly human condition. The argument had proved potent then. Why

not now?

“It's just the humanity in me you can sense,” he said to Celestine.

She was clearly unpersuaded. “Oh, no,” she replied. “I'm the humanity in you.”

He was about to laugh this absurdity off, but her stare hushed him.

“What part of me are you?” he murmured.

“Don't you know yet?” she said. “Child, I'm your mother.”

Gentle led the way as they stepped into the cool of the tower's foyer. There was no sound

from anywhere in the building, above or below,

“Where's Celestine?” he asked Jude. She led him to the door into the Tabula Rasa's meeting

room, where he told them all, “This is something for me to do, brother

to brother.”

“I'm not afraid,” Monday piped up.

“No, but I am,” Gentle said with a smile. “And I wouldn't want you to see me piss my pants.

Stay up here. I'll be out double quick.”

“Make sure you are,” Clem said. “Or we're coming down to get you.”

With that promise as comfort, Gentle slipped through the door into what remained of

Roxborough's house. Though he'd felt nothing in the way of memories as he'd entered the

tower, he felt them now. They weren't as material as those that visited him in Gamut Street,

where the very boards seemed to have recorded the souls that had trodden them. These

were vague recollections of the times he'd drunk and debated around the great oak table. He

didn't allow nostalgia to delay him, however, but passed through the room like a man vexed

by admirers, arms raised against their blandishments, and headed down into the cellar. He'd

had this labyrinth and its contents (all spined and skin-bound, whether human or not)

described to him by Jude, but the sight still amazed him. All this wisdom, buried in darkness.

Was it any wonder the Imagical life of the Fifth had been so anemic in the last two centuries,

when all the liquors that might have fortified it had been hidden here?

But he hadn't come to browse, glorious as that prospect was. He'd come for Celestine,

who'd trailed, of all things, the name Nisi Nirvana to bring him here.

He didn't know why.

Though he vaguely remembered the name, and knew there was some story to go with it, he

could neither remember the tale nor recall whose knee he'd first heard it at. Perhaps she

knew the answer.

There was a wonderful agitation here. Even the dust would not lie down and die, but

moved in giddy constellations, which he divided as he strode. He made no false turns, but

the route from the steps to the place where Celestine lay was still a long one, and before he'd

reached it he heard a cry. It wasn't a woman's cry, he thought, but the echoes disfigured it,

and he couldn't be certain. He picked up his speed, turning corner after corner, knowing as

he went that his other had preceded him every step of the way. There were no furt her cries

after the first, but as his destination came in view—it looked like a cave, raggedly dug from

the wall; an oracle's home—he heard a different sound: that of bricks, grinding their gritty

faces together. There were small but constant falls of dried mortar from the ceiling, and a

subtle trembling in the ground. He started up over the litter of fallen rock, which was strewn

like a battlefield with gutted books, to the inviting crack. As he did so he caught a glimpse of

a violent motion inside, which had him to the threshold in a stumbling rush.

“Brother?” he said, even before he'd found Sartori in the gloom. “What are you doing?”

Now he saw his other, closing on the woman in the corner of the cave. She was almost

naked, but far from defenseless. Ribbons, like the rags of a bridal train but made of her flesh,

were springing from her shoulders and back, their power clearly more substantial than their

delicacy implied. Some were clinging to the wall above her head, but the bulk were extended

towards Sartori and wrapped around his head like a smothering hood. He clawed at them,

working his fingers between them to get a better grip. Fluid ran from the gouged flesh, and

cobs of matter came away in his fists. It could only be a matter of time before he release d

himself, and when he did he'd do her no little harm.

Gentle didn't call to his brother a second time. What was the use? The man was deafened.

Instead, he crossed the cave at a stumbling rush and took hold of Sartori from behind,

dragging his brother's arms from their maiming work and pinning them to his sides. As he

did so he saw Celestine's gaze go between the two figures in front of her, and either the

shock of what she was witnessing or her exhaustion took its toll on her strength. The

wounded ribbons loosened and fell in wreaths around Sartori's neck, uncovering the other

face and confirming Celestine in her distress. She withdrew the ribbons entirely, gathering

them into her lap.

With his sight returned, Sartori wrenched his head around to identify his captor. Seeing

Gentle, he instantly gave up his struggle to free himself and stood in the Reconciler's arms,

quite pacified.

"Why do I always find you doing harm, brother?" Gentle asked him.

"Brother?" said Sartori. "Since when was it brother?"

"That's what we are."

"You tried to kill me in Yzordderrex, or have you forgotten? Has something changed?"

"Yes," said Gentle, "I have."

"Oh?"

"I'm ready to accept our... kinship."

"A fine word."

"In fact, I accept my responsibility for everything I was, am, or will be. I've got your Oviat

to thank for that."

"That's good to hear," Sartori said. "Especially in this company."

He looked back at Celestine. She was still standing, though it was plainly the filaments

hugging the wall that held her up, not her legs. Her eyes were flickering closed, and there

were tremors running through her body. Gentle knew she needed aid, but he could do

nothing while he was burdened with Sartori, so he turned and pitched his brother towards

the cave door. Sartori went from him like a doll, only raising his arms

to break his fall at the

very last.

“Help her if you want,” he said, staring back at Gentle with slackened features. “It's no skin

off my nose.”

Then he lifted himself up. For an instant Gentle thought he intended some reprisal, and

drew breath to defend himself.

But the other simply said, “I'm on my belly, brother. Would you harm me here?”

As if to prove how low he'd fallen and was willing to stay, he began to slink over the earth,

like a snake driven from a hearth.

“You're welcome to her,” he said, and disappeared into the brighter murk beyond the door.

Celestine's eyes had closed by the time Gentle looked back, her body hanging limply from

the tenacious ribbons. He went towards her, but as he approached her lids flickered open,

“No...” she said. “I don't want... you... near... me.”

Could he blame her? One man with his face had already attempted murder, or violation, or

both. Why should she trust another? Nor was this any time to be pleading his innocence; she

needed help, not apology. The question was, from whom? Jude had made it clear on the way

up that she'd been sent from this woman's side the same way he was being sent. Perhaps

Clem could nurse the woman.

"I'll send somebody to help you," he said, and headed out into the passa geway.

Sartori had disappeared: lifted himself off his belly and taken to his heels. Once again

Gentle went in his footsteps, back towards the stairs. He'd covered half that distance when

Jude, Clem, and Monday appeared. Their frowns evaporated when they saw Gentle.

"We thought he'd murdered you," Jude said. _ "He didn't touch me. But he's hurt Celestine,

and she won't let me near her. Clem, will you see if you can help? But be careful. She may

look sick, but she's strong."

"Where is she?"

"Jude'lltake you. I'm going after Sartori."

"He's gone up the tower," Monday said.

"He didn't even look at us," Jude said. She sounded almost offended. "He just stumbled out

and up the stairs. What the hell did you dp to him?"

"Nothing."

"I never saw an expression like that on his face before. Or yours, come to that."

"Like what?"

"Tragic," said Clem.

"Maybe we're going to win a quicker victory than I thought," Gentle said, starting past

them to the stairs.

“Wait,” Jude said. “We can't tend to Celestine here. We need to take her somewhere safer.”

“Agreed.”

“The studio, maybe?”

“No,” Gentle said. “There's a house I know in Clerken—well where we'll be safe. He drove

me out of it once. But it's mine, and we're going back to it. AH of us.”

The sun that met Gentle in the foyer put him in mind of Taylor, whose wisdom, spoken

through a sleeping boy, had begun this day. That dawn already seemed an age ago, the hours

since then had been so filled with journeys and revelations. It would be this way until the

Reconciliation, he knew. The London he'd wandered in his first years, brimming with

possibilities—a city Pie had once said hid more angels than God's skirts—was once again a

place of presences, and he rejoiced in the fact. It gave heat to his heels as he mounted the

stairs, two and three at a time. Strange as it was, he was actually eager to see Sartori's face

again: to speak with his other and know his mind.

Jude had prepared him for what he'd find on the top floor: bland corridors leading to the

Tabula Rasa's table, and the body sprawled there. The scent of Godolphin's undoing was

there to meet him as he stepped into the passageway: a sickening reminder, though he

scarcely needed one, that revelation had a grimmer face and that those last halcyon days,

when he'd been the most lauded metaphysician in Europe, had ended in atrocity. It would

not happen again, he swore to himself. Last time the ceremonies had been brought to grief

by the brother waiting for him at the end of this corridor, and if he had to commit fratricide

to remove the danger of a recurrence, then so be it. Sartori was the spirit of his own

imperfections made flesh. To kill him would be a cleansing, and welcome, perhaps, to them

both.

As he advanced along the corridor the sickly smell of Godolphin's putrefaction grew

stronger. He held his breath against it and came to the door in utter silence. It nevertheless

swung open as he approached, his own voice inviting him in.

"There's no harm in here, brother; not from me. And I don't need you on your belly to

prove your good intentions."

Gentle stepped inside. All the drapes were drawn against the sun, but even the sturdiest

fabric usually let some trace of light through its weave. Not so here. The room was sealed by

something more than curtains and brick, and Sartori was sitting in this darkness, his form

visible only because the door was ajar.

"Will you sit?" he said. "I know this isn't a very wholesome slab"—the body of Oscar

Godolphin had gone, the mess of his blood and rot remaining in pools and smears — "but I

like the formality. We should negotiate like civilized beings, yes?"

Gentle acceded to this, walking to the other end of the table and sitting down, content to

demonstrate good faith unless or until Sartori showed signs of treachery. Then he'd be swift

and calamitous.

“Where did the body go?” he asked.

“It's here. I'll bury it after we've talked. This is no place for a man to rot. Or maybe it's the

perfect place, I don't know. We can vote on it later.”

“Suddenly you're a democrat.”

“You said you were changing. So am I.”

“Any particular reason?”

“We'll get to that later. First—”

He glanced towards the door, and it swung closed, plunging them both into utter darkness.

“You don't mind, do you?” Sartori said. “This isn't a conversation we should have looking at

ourselves. The mirror's bad enough.”

“You didn't mind in Yzordderrex.”

“I was incarnate there. Here I feel... immaterial. I was really impressed by what you did in

Yzordderrex, by the way. One word from you, and it just crumbled away.”

“Your handiwork, not mine.”

“Oh, don't be obtuse. You know what history'll say. It won't give a fuck about the politics.

It'll say the Reconciler arrived, and the walls came tumbling down. And you're not going to

argue with that. It feeds the legend; it makes you look messianic. That's what you really

want, isn't it? The question is: if you're the Reconciler, what am I? “

“We don't have to be enemies.”

“Didn't I say the very same thing in Yzordderrex? And didn't you try and murder me?”

“I had good reason.”

“Name one.”

“You destroyed the first Reconciliation.”

“It wasn't the first. There've been three other attempts to my certain knowledge.”

“It was my first. My Great Work. And you destroyed it.”

“Who did you hear that from?”

“From Lucius Cobbitt,” Gentle replied.

There was a silence then, and in it Gentle thought he heard the darkness move, a sound

like silk on silk. But his head was never quite silent these days, and before he could clear a

path through the whispers Sartori had recovered his equilibrium.

“So Lucius is alive,” he said.

“Just in memory. In Gamut Street.”

“That fuckhead Little Ease let you have quite an education, didn't he? I'll have his guts.” He

sighed. “I miss Rosengarten, you know. He was so very loyal. And Racidio and Mattalaus. I

had some good people in Yzordderrex. People I could trust; people who loved me. It's the

face, I think; it inspires devotion. You must have noticed that. Is it the divine in you, or is it

just the way we smile? I resist the notion that one's a symptom of the other. Hunchbacks can

be saints and beauties perfect monsters. Haven't you found that?”

“Certainly.”

“You see how much we agree? We sit here in the dark, and we talk like friends. I truly think

if we never again stepped out into the light we could learn to love each other, after a time.”

“That can't happen.”

“Why not?”

“Because I've work to do, and I won't let you delay me.”

“You did terrible harm last time, Maestro. Remember that. Put it in your mind's eye.

Remember how it looked, seeing the In Ovo spilling out....”

By the sound of Sartori's voice, Gentle guessed that the man had risen to his feet. But again

it was difficult to be certain, when the darkness was so profound. He stood up himself, his

chair tipping over behind him.

“The In Ovo's a filthy place,” Sartori was saying. “And believe me, I don't want it dirtying

up this Dominion. But I'm afraid that may be inevitable.”

Now Gentle was certain there was some duplicity here. Sartori's voice no longer had a

single source but was being subtly disseminated throughout the room, as though he was

seeping into the darkness.

“If you leave this room, brother—if you leave me alone—there'll be such horror unleashed

on the Fifth.”

“I won't make any errors this time.”

“Who's talking about error?” Sartori said. “I'm talking about what I'll do for righteousness’

sake, if you desert me.”

“So come with me.”

“What for? To be your disciple? Listen to what you're saying! I've got as much right to be

called Messiah as you. Why should I be a piddling acolyte? Do me the courtesy of

understanding that, at least.”

“So do I have to kill you?”

“You can try.”

“I'm ready to do it, brother, if you force me.”

“So am I. So am I.”

There was no purpose in further debate, Gentle thought. If he was going to kill the man, as

it seemed he must, he wanted to do it swiftly and cleanly. But he needed light for the deed.

He moved towards the door, intending to open it, but as he did so something touched his

face. He put his hand up to snatch it away, but it had already gone, flitting towards the

ceiling. What defense was this? He'd sensed no living thing when he'd entered the room,

other than Sartori. The darkness had been inert. Either it had now taken on some illusory

life as an extension of Sartori's will, or else his other had used the darkness as a cover for

some summoning. But what? There'd been no evocations spoken, no hint of a feat. If he'd

managed to call up some defender, it was flimsy and witless. He heard it flapping against the

ceiling like a blinded bird.

"I thought we were alone," he said. "Our last conversation needs witnesses, or how would

the world know I gave you a chance to save it?" "Biographers, now?" "Not exactly...."

"What then?" Gentle said, his outstretched hand reaching the wall and sliding along it

towards the door. "Why don't you show me?" he said, his palm closing around the handle.

"Or are you too ashamed?"

With this, he pulled not one but both doors open. The phenomenon that followed was more

startling than dire. The meager light in the passageway outside was drawn into the room in

a rush, as though it were milk, sucked from day's teat to feed what waited inside. It flew past

him, dividing as it went, going to a dozen places around the room, high and low. Then the

handles were snatched from Gentle's grip, and the doors slammed.

He turned back to face the room and as he did so heard the table being thrown over. Some

of the light had been drawn to what lay beneath. There was Godolphin, gutted, his entrails

splayed around him, his kidneys laid on his eyes, his heart at his groin. And skittering

around his body, some of the entities this arrangement had called forth, carrying fragments

of the light stolen through the door. None of them made much sense to Gentle's eye. They

had no limbs recognizable as such, nor any trace of features, nor, in most cases, heads upon

which features might have sat. They were scraps of nonsense, some strung together like the

cloggings of a drain, and mindlessly busy, others lying like bloated fruit, splitting and

splitting and showing themselves seedless.

Gentle looked towards Sartori. He hadn't taken any light for himself, but a loop of wormy

life hung over his head and cast its baleful brightness down.

"What have you done?" Gentle asked him.

"There are workings a Reconciler would never stoop to know. This is one. These beasts are

Oviates. Peripeteria. You can't raise the weightier beasts with a corpse that's cold. But these

things know how to be compliant, and that's all either you or I have ever really asked for

from our abettors, isn't it? Or our loved ones, come to that."

"Well, you've shown me them now," Gentle said. "You can send them home."

"Oh, no, brother. I want you to know what they can do. They're the least of the least, but

they've got some maddening tricks."

Sartori glanced up, and the loop of wretchedness above him went from its cherished place,

moving towards Gentle, then to the ground, its target not the living but the dead. It was

around Godolphin's neck in moments, while in the air above it an alliance of its fellows

formed, congealing into a peristaltic cloud. The loop tightened like a noose and rose, hauling

Godolphin up. The kidneys fell from his eyes; they were open beneath. The heart dropped

from his groin; there was a wound where his manhood had been. Then the remaining

innards spilled from his carcass, preserved in a jelly of cold blood. The peripeteria overhead

offered themselves as a gallows for the ascending noose and, having it in their midst, rose

again, so that the dead man's feet were pulled clear off the ground.

"This is obscene, Sartori," Gentle said. "Stop it."

"It's not very pretty, is it? But think, brother, think what an army of them could do. You

couldn't even heal this single little horror, never mind this a thousandfold." He paused, then

said, with genuine inquiry in his voice, "Or could you? Could you raise poor Oscar? From the

dead, I mean. Could you do that?"

He left his place at the other end of the room and moved towards Gentle, the look on his

face, tit by the gallows, one of exhilaration at this possibility. "If you could do that," he said ,

"I swear I'd be your perfect disciple. I would."

He was past the hanged man now and coming within a yard or two of Gentle. "I swear," he

said again.

"Let him down."

"Why?"

“Because it's pointless and pathetic.”

“Maybe that's what I am,” Sartori said. “Maybe that's what I've been from the beginning,
and I never had the wit to realize it.”

This was a new tack, Gentle thought. Five minutes before the man had been demanding due

respect as an aspirant Messiah; now he was wallowing in self-abnegation.

“I've had so many dreams, brother. Oh, the cities I've imagined! The empires! But I could

never quite remove the niggling doubt, you know? The worm at the back of the skull that

keeps saying, It'll come to nothing, it'll come to nothing. And you know what? The worm was

right. All I ever attempted was doomed from the beginning, because of what we are to each

other.”

Tragic, Clem had said, describing the look on Sartori's face as he'd fled the cellar. And

perhaps in his way he was. But what had he learned, that had brought him so low? It had to

be goaded out of him, now or never.

“I saw your empire,” Gentle replied. “It didn't fall apart because there was some judgment

on it. You built it out of shit. That's why it collapsed.”

“But don't you see? That was the judgment. I was the architect, and I was also the judge

who found it unworthy. I was set against myself from the beginning, and I never realized it.”

“But you realize it now?”

"It couldn't be plainer."

"Why? Do you see yourself in this filth? Is that it?"

"No, brother," Sartori said. "It's when I look at you—"

"At me?"

Sartori stared at him, tears beginning to fill his eyes. "She thought I was you," he

murmured.

"Judith?"

"Celestine. She didn't know there were two of us. How could she? So when she saw me she

.was pleased. At first, anyway."

There was a weight of pain in his speech Gentle hadn't anticipated, and it was no pretense.

Sartori was suffering like a damned man.

"Then she smelled me," he went on. "She said I stank of evil, and I disgusted her."

"Why should you care?" Gentle said. "You wanted to kill her anyway."

"No," he protested. "That wasn't what I wanted at all. I wouldn't have laid a finger on her if

she hadn't attacked me."

"You're suddenly very loving."

"Of course."

"I don't see why."

"Didn't you say we were brothers?"

"Yes."

"Then she's my mother too. Don't I have some right to be loved by

her?”

“Mother?”

“Yes. Mother. She's your mother, Gentle. She was raped by the Unbeheld, and you're the consequence.”

Gentle was too shocked to reply. His mind was gathering puzzles from far and wide—all of

them solved by this revelation—and the solving filled him to brimming.

Sartori wiped his face with the heels of his hands. “I was born to be the Devil, brother,” he

said. “Hell to your Heaven. Do you see? Every plan I ever laid, every ambition I ever had, is a

mockery, because the part of me that's you wants love and glory and great works, and the

part of me that's our Father knows it's shite and brings it down. I'm my own destroyer,

brother. All I can do is live with destruction, until the end of the world.”

In the foyer six stories below, Celestine's rescuers had, after much coaxing, persuaded the

woman out of the labyrinth and into the light. Weak though she'd been when Clem had

entered her cell, she'd resisted his consolations for a good while, telling him that she wanted

no part of them. She preferred to remain underground, she said, and perish there.

His experience on the streets had given him a way with such recalcitrance. He didn't argue

with her, nor did he leave. He bided his time at the threshold, telling her she was probably

right; there was nothing to be gained from seeing the sun.

After a while she balked at this, telling him that wasn't her opinion at all and if he had any

decency about him he'd give her some comfort in her distress. Did he want her to die Uke an

animal, she said, locked away in the dark? He then allowed that the fault was his, and if she

wanted to be taken up into the outside world, he'd do what he could.

With his tactic successful, he sent Monday off to bring Jude's car to the front of the tower

and began the business of getting Celestine out. There was a delicate moment at the door of

the cell when the woman, setting eyes on Jude, almost recanted her desire to leave, saying

she wanted no truck with this tainted creature. Jude kept her silence, and Clem, tact

personified, sent her up to fetch blankets from the car while he escorted Celestine to the

stairs. It was a slow business, and several times she asked him to stop, holding on to him

fiercely and telling him that she wasn't trembling because she was afraid, but because her

body was unused to such freedom, and that if anybody, particularly the tainted woman, was

to remark on these tremors, he was to hush them.

Thus, clinging to Clem one moment, then demanding he not lean on her the next, slowing at

times, then rising up with preternatural strength in her sinews the instant after,

Roxborough's captive quit her prison after two centuries of incarceration, and went up to

meet the day.

But the tower's sum of surprises, whether above or below, was not yet exhausted. As Clem

escorted her across the foyer, he stopped, his eyes on the door ahead, or rather on the

sunlight that poured through it. It was laden with motes: pollen and seeds from the trees

and plants outside; dust from the road beyond. Though there was scarcely a breeze outside,

they were in lively motion.

"We've got a visitor," he remarked.

"Here?" Jude said. "Up ahead."

She looked at the light. Though she could see nothing that resembled a human form in it,

the particles were not moving arbitrarily. There was some organizing principle among them,

and Gem, it seemed, knew its name.

"Taylor," he said, his voice thick with feeling. "Taylor's here."

He glanced across at Monday, who without being told stepped in to take Celestine's weight.

The woman had been hovering on unconsciousness again, but now she raised her head and

watched, as did they all, while Clem started to walk towards the light-filled door.

"It's you, isn't it?" he said softly.

In reply, the motion in the light became more agitated.

"I thought so," Clem said, coming to a halt a couple of yards from the edge of the pool.

“What does he want?” Jude said. “Can you tell?”

Clem glanced back at her, his expression both awed and afraid.

“He wants me to let him in,” he replied. “He wants to be here.” He tapped his chest. “Inside

me.”

Jude smiled. The day had brought little in the way of good news, but here was some: the

possibility of a union she'd never have believed possible. Still Clem hesitated, keeping his

distance from the light.

“I don't know if I can do it,” he said.

“He's not going to hurt you,” Jude said.

“I know,” Clem said, glancing back at the light. Its gilded dust was more hectic than ever.

“It's not the hurt...”

“What then?”

He shook his head.

“I did it, man,” Monday said. “Just close your eyes and think of England.”

This earned a little laugh from Clem, who was still staring at the light when Jude voiced the

final persuasion.

“You loved him,” she said.

The laugh caught in Clem's throat, and in the utter hush that followed he murmured, “I still

do.”

“Then be with him.”

He looked back at her one last time and smiled. Then he stepped into

the light.

To Jude's eyes there was nothing so remarkable about the sight. It was just a door, and a

man stepping through it into sunlight. But there was significance in it now she'd never

understood before, and as she stood witness a warning of Oscar's returned to her head,

spoken as they'd prepared to leave for Yzordderrex. She'd come back changed, he'd said,

seeing the world she'd left with clearer eyes. Here was proof of that. Perhaps sunlight had

always been numinous, and doorways signs of a greater passage than that of one room to

another. But she'd not seen it, until now.

Clem stood in the beams for perhaps thirty seconds, his hands palm up in front of him.

Then he turned back towards her, and she saw that Taylor had come with him. If she'd been

asked to name the places where she saw his presence, she couldn't have done so. There was

no change in his physiognomy, no particular in which they could be seen, unless it was in

signs so subtle—the angle of his head, the fixedness of his mouth—that she couldn't

distinguish them. But he was there, no doubt of it. And so was an urgency that had not been

in Clem a minute before.

“Take Celestine out of here,” he said to Jude and Monday. “There's something terrible going

on upstairs.”

He left the doorway, heading for the stairs.

“Do you want help?” Jude said.

“No. Stay with her. She needs you.”

At this, Celestine uttered her first words since leaving the cell. “I don't need her,” she said.

Clem reeled around on one heel, coming back to the woman and putting his nose an inch

from hers.

“You know, I'm finding you hard to like, madam!” he snapped.

Jude laughed out loud, hearing Tay's irascible tones so clearly. She'd forgotten how his and

Clem's natures had dovetailed, before sickness had taken the piss and vinegar out of Tay.

“We're here because of you, remember that,” Tay said. “And you'd still be down there

picking the fluff from your navel if Judy hadn't brought us.”

Celestine narrowed her eyes. “Put me back, then,” she said.

“Just for that”—Jude held her breath; he wouldn't, surely? — “I'm going to give you a big

kiss and ask you very politely to stop being a cantankerous old bag.” He kissed her on the

nose. “Now let's get going,” he said to Monday, and before Celestine could summon a reply

he headed to the stairs and was up them and out of sight.

Exhausted by his outpouring of pain, Sartori turned from Gentle and began to wander back

to the chair where he'd been sitting at the start of their interview. He idled as he went,

kicking over those servile scraps that came to dote on him and pausing to look up at

Godolphin's gutted body, then setting it in motion with a touch, so that its bulk eclipsed and

uncovered him by turns, as he went to his little throne. There were peripeteria gathered

around in a sycophantic horde, but Gentle didn't wait for him to order them against him.

Sartori was no less dangerous for the despair he'd just expressed; all it did was free him

from any last hope of peace between them. It freed Gentle too. This had to end in Sartori's

dispatch, or the Devil he'd decided to be would undo the Great Work all over again. Gentle

drew breath. As soon as his brother turned he'd let the pneuma fly and be done.

"What makes you think you can kill me, brother?" Sartori said, still not turning. "God's in

the First Dominion, and Mother's nearly dead downstairs. You're alone. All you have is your

breath."

Godolphin's body continued to swing between them, but the man kept his back turned.

"And if you unknit me, what do you do to yourself in the process? Have you thought about

that? Kill me, and maybe you kill yourself."

Gentle knew Sartori was capable of planting such doubts all night. It was the complement

to his own lost skill with seduction: dropping these possibilities into promising earth. He

wouldn't be delayed by them. His pneuma readied, he started after the

man, pausing only for

the swing of Godolphin's corpse, then stopping on the other side of it. Sartori still refused to

show his face, and Gentle had no option but to waste a little of the killing breath with words.

“Look at me, brother,” he said.

He read the intention to do so in Sartori's body, a motion beginning in his heels and torso

and head. But before his face came in sight Gentle heard a sound behind him and glanced

back to see the third actor here—the dead Godolphin—dropping from his gallows. He had

time to glimpse the Oviates in the carcass; then it was upon him. It should have been easy to

stand aside, but the beasts had done more than nest in the corpse. They were busy in

Godolphin's rotted muscle, engineering the resurrection Sartori had begged Gentle to

perform. The corpse's arms snatched hold of him, and its bulk, all the vaster for the weight

of parasites, bore him to his knees. The breath went out of him as harmless air, and before

he could take another his arms were caught and twisted to breaking point behind his back.

“Never turn your back on a dead man,” Sartori said, finally showing his face.

There was no triumph on it, though he'd incapacitated his enemy in one swift maneuver.

He turned his sorrowful eyes up to the host of peripeteria that had been Godolphin's gallows

and, with the thumb of his left hand, described a tiny circle. They took

their cue instantly,

the motion appearing in their cloud.

"I'm more superstitious than you, brother," Sartori said, reaching behind him and throwing

over his chair. It didn't lie where it fell, but rolled on around the room as though the motion

overhead had some correspondence below. "I'm not going to lay a hand on you," he went on.

"In case there is some consequence for a man who takes his other's life." He raised his

palms. "Look, I'm blameless," he said, stepping back towards the draped windows. "You're

going to die because the world is coming apart."

While he spoke the motion around Gentle increased, as the peripetria took their

summoner's cue. They were insubstantial as individuals, but en masse they had considerable

authority. As their circling speeded up, it generated a current strong enough to lift the chair

Sartori had overthrown into the air. The light fixtures were sheared off the walls, taking

cobs of plaster with them; the handles were ripped from the doors; and the rest of the chairs

snatched up to join the tarantella, smashed to firewood as they collided with each other.

Even the table, enormous as it was, began to move. At the eye of this storm Gentle struggled

to free himself from Godolphin's cold embrace. He might have done so, given time, but the

circle and its freight of shards closed on him too quickly. Unable to protect himself, all he

could do was bow his head against the hail of wood, plaster, and glass, the breath pummeled

from him by the assault. Only once did he lift his eyes to look for Sartori through the storm.

His brother stood flat against the wall, his head thrown back as he watched the execution. If

there was any feeling on his face, it was that of a man offended by what he saw, a lamb

obliged to watch helplessly as his companion was pulped.

It seemed he didn't hear the voice raised in the corridor outside, but Gentle did. It was

Clem, calling the Maestro's name and beating on the door. Gentle didn't have the stren gth

left to reply. His body sagged in Godolphin's arms as the fusillade increased, striking his

skull and rib cage and thighs. Clem, God love him, didn't need an answering call. He slammed

himself against the door repeatedly, and the lock suddenly burst, throwing both doors open

at once.

There was more light outside than in, of course, and just as before it was drawn into the

darkened room at a rush, sweeping past the astonished Clem. The peripeteria were as

desperate as ever to have a sliver of illumination for themselves, and their swirling ranks

fell into confusion at the appearance of the light. Gentle felt the hold on him loosen as those

Oviates who'd quickened Godolphin's corpse left off their labors and

went to join the melee.

With the energies in the room diverted, the circling wreckage began to lose momentum, but

not before a piece of the splintered table struck one of the open doors, sheering it off at the

hinges. Clem saw the collision coming and retreated before he too was struck, his shout of

alarm stirring Sartori.

Gentle looked towards his brother. He'd left off his sham of innocence and was studying

the stranger in the hallway with gleaming eyes. He didn't leave his place at the wall, .

however. A rain of wreckage was falling now, littering the room from end to end, and he

clearly had no desire to step into it. Instead he reached up to snatch a uredo from his eye,

intending to strike Clem down before he could intervene again.

Godolphin's bulk was doubling Gentle over, but he strained to raise himself from beneath

it, yelling a warning to Clem, who was back at the threshold now, as he did so. Clem heard

the shout and saw Sartori snatch at his eye. Though he had no knowledge of what the

gesture meant, he was quick to defend himself, ducking behind the surviving door as the

killing blow flew his way. In the same instant, Gentle heaved himself to his feet, throwing off

Godolphin's body. He glanced in Clem's direction to be certain his friend had survived and,

seeing that he had, started towards Sartori. He had breath in his body now, and might easily

have dispatched a pneuma at his enemy. But his hands wanted more than air in them. They

wanted flesh; they wanted , bone.

Careless of the trash that was both underfoot and falling from the air, he ran at his brother,

who sensed his approach and turned his way. Gentle had time to see the face before him

smile a feral welcome; then he was upon him. His momentum carried them both back against

the drapes. The window behind Sartori shattered, and the rail above him broke, bringing the

curtain down.

This time the light that filled the room was a blaze, and it felt directly on Gentle's face. He

was momentarily blinded, but his body still knew its business. He pushed his brother to the

sill and hauled him up over it. Sartori reached for a handhold and snatched at the fallen

drape, but its folds were of little use. The cloth tore as he tipped backwards, carried over the

sill by his brother's arms. Even then he fought to keep himself from falling, but Gentle gave

him no quarter. Sartori flailed for a moment, scrabbling at the air. Then he was gone from

Gentle's hands, his scream going with him, down and down and down.

Gentle didn't see the fall and was glad of it. Only when the cry stopped did he retreat from

the window and cover his face, while the circle of the sun blazed blue and green and red

behind his lids. When he finally opened his eyes, it was to devastation. The only whole thing

in the room was Clem, and even he was the worse for wear. He'd picked himself up and was

watching the Oviates, who'd fought so vehemently for a piece of light, withering for excess of

it. Their matter was drab slough, their skitters and flights reduced to a wretched crawling

retreat from the window.

"I've seen prettier turds," Gem remarked.

Then he started around the room, pulling all the rest of the drapes down, the dust he

raised making the sun solid as it came and leaving no shadow for the peripeteria to retreat

to.

"Taylor's here," he said, when the job was done.

"In the sun?"

"Better than that," Clem replied. "In my head. We think you need guardian angels,

Maestro."

"So do I," said Gentle. "Thank you. Both."

He turned back to the window and looked down at the wasteland into which Sartori had

fallen. He didn't expect to see a body there; nor did he. Sartori hadn't survived all those

years as Autarch without finding a hundred feits to protect his flesh.

They met Monday, who had heard the window breaking above, coming up the stairs as they

descended.

"I thought you was a goner, boss," he said.

“Almost,” came the reply.

“What do we do about Godolphin?” Clem said as the trio headed down, together.

“We don't need to do anything,” Gentle said. “There's an open window —”

“I don't think he's going to be flying anywhere.”

“No, but the birds can get to him,” Gentle said lightly. “Better to fatten birds than worms.”

“There's a morbid sense in that, I suppose,” Clem said.

“And how's Celestine?” Gentle asked the boy.

“She's in the car, all wrapped up and not saying very much. I don't think she likes the sun.”

“After two hundred years in the dark, I'm not surprised. We'll make her comfortable once

we get to Gamut Street. She's a great lady, gentlemen. She's also my mother.”

“So that's where you get your bloody-mindedness from,” Tay remarked.

“How safe is this house we're going to?” Monday asked.

“If you mean how do we stop Sartori getting in, I don't think we can.”

They'd reached the foyer, which was as sun—filled as ever.

“So what do you think the bastard's going to do?” Clem wondered.

“He won't come back here, I'm sure of that,” Gentle said. “I think he'll wander the city for a

while. But sooner or later he'll be driven back to where he belongs.”

“Which is where?”

Gentle opened his arms. “Here,” he said.

There was surely no more haunted thoroughfare in London that blistering afternoon than

Gamut Street. Neither those locations in the city famous for their phantoms, nor those

anonymous spots—known only to psychics and children— where reveuants gathered,

boasted more souls eager to debate events in the place of their decease as that backwater in

Clerkenwell. While few human eyes, even those ready for the marvelous (and the car that

turned into Gamut Street at a little past four o'clock contained several such eyes), could see

the phantoms as solid entities, their presence was clear enough, marked by the cold, still

places in the shimmering haze rising off the road and by the stray dogs that gathered in such

numbers at the corners, drawn by the high whistle some of the dead were wont to make.

Thus Gamut Street cooked in a heat of its own, its stew potent with spirits.

Gentle had warned them all that there was no comfort to be had at the house. It was

without furniture, water, or electricity. But the past was there, he said, and it would be a

comfort to them all, after their time in the enemy's tower.

"I remember this house," Jude said as she emerged from the car.

"We should both be careful," Gentle warned, as he climbed the steps.

“Sartori left one of his

Oviates inside, and it nearly drove me crazy. I want to get rid of it before we all go in.”

“I'm coming with you,” Jude said, following him to the door.

“I don't think that's wise,” he said. “Let me deal with Little Ease first.”

“That's Sartori's beast?”

“Yes.”

“Then I'd like to see it. Don't worry, it's not going to hurt me. I've got a little of its Maestro

right here, remember?” She laid her hand upon her belly. “I'm safe.”

Gentle made no objection but stood aside to let Monday force the door, which he did with

the efficiency of a practiced thief. Before the boy had even retreated down the steps again,

Jude was over the threshold, braving the stale, cold air.

“Wait up,” Gentle said, following her into the hallway,

“What does this creature look like?” she wanted to know.

“Like an ape. Or a baby. I don't know. It talks a lot, I'm certain of that much.”

“Little Ease .. — .”

“That's right.”

“Perfect name for a place like this.”

She'd reached the bottom of the stairs and was staring up towards the Meditation Room.

“Be careful,” Gentle said.

“I heard you the first time.”

“I don't think you quite understand how powerful—”

"I was born up there, wasn't I?" she said, her tone as chilly as the air.
He didn't reply; not

until she swung around and asked him again. "Wasn't I?"

"Yes."

Nodding, she returned to her study of the stairs. "You said the past
was waiting here," she

said.

"Yes."

"My past too?"

"I don't know. Probably."

"I don't feel anything. It's like a bloody graveyard. A few vague
recollections, that's all."

"They'll come."

"You're very certain."

"We have to be whole, Jude."

"What do you mean by that?"

"We have to be ... reconciled . . . with everything we ever were before
we can go on."

"Suppose I don't want to be reconciled? Suppose I want to invent
myself all over again,

starting now?"

"You can't do it," he said simply. "We have to be whole before we can
get home."

"If that's home," she said, nodding in the direction of the Meditation
Room, "you can keep

it."

"I don't mean the cradle."

"What then?"

“The place before the cradle. Heaven.”

“Fuck Heaven. I haven't got Earth sorted out yet.”

“You don't need to.”

“Let me be the judge of that. I haven't even had a life I could call my own, and you're ready

to slot me into the grand design. Well, I don't think I want to go. I want to be my own

design.”

“You can be. As part of—”

“Part of nothing. I want to be me. A law unto myself.”

“That isn't you talking. It's Sartori.”

“What if it is?”

“You know what he's done,” Gentle replied. “The atrocities. What are you doing taking

lessons from him?”

“When I should be taking them from you, you mean? Since when were you so damn

perfect?” He made no reply, and she took his silence as further sign of his new high -

mindedness. “Oh, so you're not going to stoop to mudslinging, is that it?”

“We'll debate it later,” he said.

“Debate it?” she mocked. “What are you going to give us, Maestro, an ethics lesson? I want

to know what makes you so damn rare.”

“I'm Celestine's son,” he said quietly.

She stared at him, agog. “You're what?”

“Celestine's son. She was taken from the Fifth—”

“I know where she was taken. Dowd did it. I thought he'd told me the whole story.”

“Not this part?”

“Not this part.”

“There were kinder ways to tell you. I'm sorry I didn't find one.”

“No,” she said. “Where better?”

Her gaze went back up the stairs. When she spoke again, which was not for a little time, it

was in a whisper.

“You're lucky,” she said. “Home and Heaven are the same place.”

“Maybe that's true for us all,” he murmured.

“I doubt it.”

A long silence followed, punctuated only by Monday's forlorn attempts to whistle on the

step outside.

At last, Jude said, “I can see now why you're so desperate to get all this right. You're... how

does it go? ... you're about your Father's business.”

“I hadn't thought of it quite like that...”

“But you are.”

“I suppose I am. I just hope I'm equal to it, that's all. One minute I feel it's all possible. The

next...”

He studied her, while outside Monday attempted the tune afresh.

“Tell me what you're thinking,” he said.

“I'm thinking I wish I'd kept your love letters,” she replied.

There was another aching pause; then she turned from him and wandered off towards the

back of the house. He lingered at the bottom of the stairs, thinking he should probably go

with her, in case Sartori's agent was hiding there, but he was afraid to bruise her further

with his scrutiny. He glanced back towards the open door and the sun — “light on the step.

Safety wasn't far from her, if she needed it.

“How's it going?” he called to Monday.

“Hot,” came the reply. “Clem's gone to fetch some food and beer. Lots of beer. We should

have a party, boss. We fuckin' deserve it, don't we?”

“We do. How's Celestine?”

“She's asleep. Is it okay to come in yet?”

“Just a little while longer,” Gentle replied. “But keep up the whistling, will you? There's a

tune in there somewhere.”

Monday laughed, and the sound, which was utterly commonplace of course, yet as unlikely

as whale song, pleased him. If Little Ease was still in the house, Gentle thought, his malice

could do no great harm on a day as miraculous as this. Comforted, he set off up the stairs,

wondering as he went if perhaps the daylight had shooed all the memories into hiding. But

before he was halfway up the flight, he had proof that they hadn't. The phantom form of

Lucius Cobbitt, conjured in his mind's eye, appeared beside him, snotty, tearful, and

desperate for wisdom. Moments later, the sound of his own voice, offering the advice he'd

given the boy that last, terrible night.

“Study nothing except in the knowledge that you already knew it. Worship nothing...”

But before he'd completed the second dictum, the phrase was taken up by a mellifluous

voice from above.

“... except in adoration of your true self. And fear noth—ing...”

The figment of Lucius Cobbitt faded as Gentle continued to climb, but the voice became

louder.

“. . . except in the certainty that you are your enemy's begetter and its only hope of

healing.”

And with the voice came the realization that the wisdom he'd bestowed on Lucius had not

been his at all. It had originated with the mystif. The door to the Meditation Room was open,

and Pie was perched on the sill, smiling out of the past.

“When did you invent that?” the Maestro asked.

“I didn't invent it, I learned it,” the mystif replied. “From my mother. And she learned it

from her mother, or t her father, who knows? Now you can pass it on.”

“And what am I?” he asked the mystif. “Your son or ; your daughter?”

— Pie looked almost abashed. “You're my Maestro.”

“Is that all? We're still masters and servants here? Don't

— say that.”

: “What should I say?” “What you feel.”

“Oh.” The mystif smiled. “If I told you what I feel we'd be here all day.”

The gleam of mischief in its eye was so endearing, and the memory so real, it was all Gentle

could do to prevent himself crossing the room and embracing the space where his friend had

sat. But there was work to be done—his Father's business, as Jude had called it—and it was

more pressing than indulging his memories. When Little Ease had been ousted from the

house, then he'd return here and search for a profounder lesson: that of the workings of the

Reconciliation. He needed that education quickly, and the echoes here were surely rife with

exchanges on the subject.

“I'll be back,” he said to the creature on the sill.

“I'll be waiting,” it replied.

He glanced back towards it, and the sun, catching the window behind, momentarily ate into

its silhouette, showing him not a whole figure but a fragment. His gut turned, as the image

called another back to mind, with appalling force: the Erasure, in roiling chaos, and in the air

above his head, the howling rags of his beloved, returned into the Second with some words

of warning.

“Undone,” it had said, as it fought the claim of the Erasure. “We are... undone.”

Had he made some placating reply, snatched from his lips by the storm? He didn't

remember. But he heard again the mystif telling him to find Sartori, instructing him that his

other knew something that he, Gentle, didn't. And then it had gone, been snatched away into

the First Dominion and silenced there.

His heart racing, Gentle shook this horror from his head and looked back towards the sill.

It was empty now. But — Pie's exhortation to find Sartori was still in his head. Why had that

been so important? he wondered. Even if the mystif had somehow discovered the truth of

Gentle's origins in the First Dominion and had failed to communicate the fact, it must have

known that Sartori was as much in ignorance of the secret as his brother. So what was the

knowledge the mystif had believed Sartori possessed, that it had defied the limits of God's

Kingdom to spur him into pursuit?

A shout from below had him give up the enigma. Jude was calling out to him. He headed

down the stairs at speed, following her voice through the house and into the kitchen, which

was large and chilly. Jude was standing close to the window, which had gone to ruin many

years ago, giving access to the convolvulus from the garden behind, which having entered

had rotted in a darkness its own abundance had thickened. The sun could only get pencil

beams through this snare of foliage and wood, but they were sufficient

to illuminate both the

woman and the captive whose head she had pinned beneath her foot.
It was Little Ease, his

oversized mouth drawn down like a tragic mask, his eyes turned up
towards Jude.

“Is this it?” she said.

“This is it.”

Little Ease set up a round of thin mewling as Gentle approached,
which it turned into

words. “I didn't do a thing! You ask her, ask her please, ask her did I
do a thing? No, I didn't.

Just keeping out of harm's way, I was.”

“Sartori's not very happy with you,” Gentle said.

“Well, I didn't have a hope,” it protested. “Not against the likes of you.
Not against a

Reconciler.”

“So you know that much.”

“I do now. 'We have to be whole,' “ it quoted, catching Gentle's tone
perfectly. “ 'We have to

be reconciled with everything we ever were—' ”

“You were listening.”

“I can't help it,” the creature said. “I was born inquisitive. I didn't
understand it, though,” it

hastened to add. “I'm not spying, I swear.”

“Liar,” Jude said. Then to Gentle, “How do we kill it?”

“We don't have to,” he said. “Are you afraid, Little Ease?”

“What do you think?”

“Would you swear allegiance to me if you were allowed to live?”

“Where do I sign? Show me the place!”

“You'd let this live?” Jude said.

“Yes.”

“What for?” she demanded, grinding her heel upon it. “Look at it.”

“Don't,” Little Ease begged.

“Swear,” said Gentle, going down on his haunches beside it.

“I swear! I swear!”

Gentle looked up at Jude. “Lift your foot,” he said.

“You trust it?”

“I don't want death here,” he said. “Even this. Let it go, Jude.” She didn't move. “I said, let it

go.”

Reluctance in every sinew, she raised her foot half an inch and Little Ease scrabbled free,

instantly taking hold of Gentle's hand.

“I'm yours, Liberatore,” it said, touching its clammy brow to Gentle's palm, “My head's in

your hands. By Hyo, by Heretea, by Hapexamendios, I commit my heart to you.”

“Accepted,” Gentle said, and stood up.

“What should I do now, Liberatore?”

“There's a room at the top of the stairs. Wait for me there”

“For ever and ever.”

“A few minutes will do.”

It backed off to the door, bowing woozily, then took to its heels.

"How can you trust a thing like that?" Jude said.

"I don't. Not yet."

"But you're willing to try."

"You're damned if you can't forgive, Jude."

"You could forgive Sartori, could you?" she said.

"He's me, he's my brother, and he's my child," Gentle replied. "How could I not?"

With the house made safe, the rest of the company moved in. Monday, ever the scavenger,

went off to scour the neighboring houses and streets in search of whatever he could find to

offer some modicum of comfort. He returned three times with bounty, the third time taking

Clem off with him. They returned half an hour later with two mattresses and armfuls of bed

linen, all too clean to have been found abandoned,

"I missed my vocation," Clem said, with Tay's mischief in his features. "Burglary's much

more fun than banking."

At this juncture Monday requested permission to borrow Jude's car and drive back to the

South Bank, there to collect the belongings he'd left behind in his haste to follow Gentle. She

told him yes, but urged him to return as fast as possible. Though it was still bright on the

street outside, they would need as many strong arms and wills as they could muster to

defend the house when night fell. Clem had settled Celestine in what had been the dining

room, laying the larger of the two mattresses on the floor and sitting with her until she slept.

When he emerged Tay's feisty presence was mellowed, and the man who came to join Jude

on the step was serene.

"Is she asleep?" Jude asked him.

"I don't know if it's sleep or a coma. Where's Gentle?"

"Upstairs, plotting,"

"You've argued."

"That's nothing new. Everything else changes, but that remains the same."

He opened one of the bottles of beer sitting on the step and drank with gusto.

"You know, I catch myself every now and then wondering if this is all some hallucination.

You've probably got a better grasp of it than I have—you've seen the Dominions; you know

it's all real—but when I went off with Monday to get the mattresses, there were people just a

few streets away, walking around in the sun as though it was just another day, and I thought,

There's a woman back there who's been buried alive for two hundred years, and her son

whose Father's a God I never heard of—"

"So he told you that."

"Oh, yes. And thinking about it, I wanted to just go home, lock the door, and pretend it

wasn't happening."

“What stopped you?”

“Monday, mostly. He just takes everything in stride. And knowing Tay's inside me. Though

that feels so natural it's like he was always there.”

“Maybe he was,” she said. “Is there any more beer?”

“Yep.”

He handed over a bottle, and she struck it on the step the way he had. The top flew; the

beer foamed.

“So what made you want to run?” she said, when she'd slaked her thirst.

“I don't know,” Clem replied. “Fear of what's coming, I suppose. But that's stupid, isn't it?”

We're here at the beginning of something sublime, just the way Tay promised. Light coming

into the world, from a place we never even dreamed existed. It's the Birth of the

Unconquered Son, isn't it?”

“Oh, the sons are going to be fine,” Jude said. “They usually are.”

“But you're not so sure about the daughters?”

“No, I'm not,” she said. “Hapexamendios killed the Goddesses throughout the Imajica, Clem,

or at least tried to. Now I find He's Gentle's Father. That doesn't make me feel too

comfortable about doing His work.”

“I can understand that.”

“Part of me thinks . . .” She let her voice trail into the silence, the thought unfinished.

“What?” he asked. “Tell me.”

“Part of me thinks we're fools to trust either of them, Hapexamendios or His Reconciler. If

He was such a loving L God, why did He do so much harm? And don't tell me He moves in

mysterious ways, because that's so much horse shit and we both know it.”

“Have you talked to Gentle about this?”

“I've tried, but he's got one thing on his mind—”

“Two,” Clem said. “The Reconciliation's one. Pie 'oh' pah's the other.”

“Oh, yes, the glorious Pie 'oh' pah.”

“Did you know he married it?”

“Yes, he told me.”

“It must have been quite a creature.”

“I'm a little biased, I'm afraid,” she said dryly. “It tried to kill me.”

“Gentle said that wasn't Pie's nature.”

“No?”

“He told me he ordered it to live its life as an assassin or a whore. It's all his fault, he said.

He blames himself for everything.”

“Does he blame himself or does he just take responsibility?” she said.

“There's a

difference.”

“I don't know,” Clem said, unwilling to be drawn on such niceties.

“He's certainly lost

without Pie.”

She kept her counsel here, wanting to say that she too : was lost, that she too pined, but

not trusting even Clem with this admission.

“He told me Pie's spirit is still alive, like Tay's,” Clem was saying. “And when this is all

over—”

“He says a lot of things,” Jude cut in, weary of hearing Gentle's wisdoms repeated. ; “And

you don't believe him?”

“What do I know?” she said, flinty now. “I don't belong • in this Gospel. I'm not his lover,

and I won't be his disciple.”

A sound behind them, and they turned to find Gentle standing in the hallway, the

brightness bouncing up from the step like footlights. There was sweat on his face, and his

shirt was stuck to his chest. Clem rose with guilty speed, his heel catching his bottle. It rolled

down two steps, spilling frothy beer as it went, before Jude caught it.

“It's hot up there,” Gentle said.

“And it's not getting any cooler,” Clem observed.

“Can I have a word?”

Jude knew he wanted to speak out of her earshot, but Clem was either too guileless to

realize this, which she doubted, or unwilling to play his game. He stayed on the step,

obliging Gentle to come to the door.

“When Monday gets back,” he said, “I'd like you to go to the estate and bring back the

stones in the Retreat. I'm going to perform the Reconciliation upstairs,

where I've got my
memories to help me."

"Why are you sending Clem?" Jude said, not rising or even turning. "I know the way; he

doesn't. I know what the stones look like; he doesn't."

"I think you'd be better off here," Gentle replied.

Now she turned. "What for?" she said. "I'm no use to anyone. Unless you simply want to

keep an eye on me."

"Not at all."

"Then let me go," she said. "I'll take Monday to help me. Clem and Tay can stay here.

They're your angels, aren't they?"

"If that's the way you'd prefer it," he said, "I don't mind."

"I'll come back, don't worry," she said derisively, raising her beer bottle. "If it's only to

toast the miracle."

A little while after this conversation, with the blue tide of dusk rising in the street and

lifting the day to the rooftops, Gentle left off his debates with Pie and went to sit with

Celestine. Her room was more meditative than the one he'd left, where the memories of Pie

had become so easy to conjure it was sometimes hard to believe the mystif wasn't there in

the flesh. Clem had lit candles beside the mattress upon which Celestine was sleeping, and

their light showed Gentle a woman so deeply asleep that no dreams

troubled her. Though

she was far from emaciated, her features were stark, as though her flesh was halfway to

becoming bone. He studied her for a time, wondering if his own face would one day possess

such severity; then he returned to the wall at the bottom of the bed and sat on his haunches

there, listening to the slow cadence of her breath.

His mind was reeling with all that he'd learned, or recollected, in the room above. Like so

much of the magic he'd become acquainted with, the working of the Reconciliation was not a

great ceremonial. Whereas most of the dominant religions of the Fifth wallowed in ritual in

order to blind their flocks to the paucity of their understanding—the liturgies and requiems,

charts and sacraments all created to amplify those tiny grains of comprehension the holy

men actually possessed—such theatrics were redundant when the ministers had truth in

their grasp, and with the help of memory he might yet become one such minister.

The principle of the Reconciliation was not very difficult to grasp, he'd discovered. Every

two hundred years, it seemed, the In Ovo produced a kind of blossom: a five—petaled lotus

which floated for a brief time in those lethal waters, immune to either their poison or their

inhabitants. This sanctuary was called by a variety of names but most simply, and most

often, the Ana. In it, the Maestros would gather, carrying there

analogues of the Dominions

they each represented. Once the pieces were assembled, the process had its own momentum.

The analogues would fuse and, empowered by the Ana, burgeon, driving the In Ovo back and

opening the way between the Reconciled Dominions and the Fifth.

“The flow of things is towards success,” the mystif had said, speaking from a better time.

“It's the natural instinct of every broken thing to make itself whole. And the Imajica is

broken until it's Reconciled.”

“Then why have there been so many failures?” Gentle had asked.

“There haven't been that many,” Pie had replied. “And they were always destroyed by

outside forces. Christos was brought down by politics. Pineo was destroyed by the Vatican.

Always people from the outside, destroying the Maestro's best intentions. We don't have

such enemies.”

Ironic words, with hindsight. Gentle could not afford such complacency again, not with

Sartori still alive and the chilling image of Pie's last frantic appearance at the Erasure still in

his head.

It was no use dwelling on it. He put the sight away as best he could, settling his gaze on

Celestine instead. It was difficult to think of her as his mother. Maybe, among the

innumerable memories he'd garnered in this house, there was some faint recollection of

being a babe in these arms, of putting his toothless mouth to these breasts and being

nourished there. But if it was there, it escaped him. Perhaps there were simply too many

years, and lives, and women, between now and that cradling. He could find it in him to be

grateful for the life she'd given him, but it was hard to feel much more than that.

After a time the vigil began to depress him. She was too like a corpse, lying there, and he

too much a dutiful but loveless mourner. He got up to go, but before he quit the room he

halted at her bedside and stooped to touch her cheek. He'd not laid his flesh to hers in

twenty-three or — four decades, and perhaps, after this, he wouldn't do so again. She wasn't

chilly, as he'd expected her to be, but warm, and he kept his hand upon her longer than he'd

intended.

Somewhere in the depths of her slumber she felt his touch and seemed to rise into a dream

of him. Her austerity softened, and her pale lips said, "Child?"

He wasn't sure whether to answer, but in the moment of hesitation she spoke again, the

same question. This time he replied.

"Yes, Mama?" he said.

"Will you remember what I told you?"

What now? he wondered. "I'm ... not certain," he told her. 'Til try."

“Shall I tell you again? I want you to remember, child.”

“Yes, Mama,” he said. “That would be good. Tell me again.”

She smiled an infinitesimal smile and began to repeat a story she'd apparently told many

times.

“There was a woman once, called Nisi Nirvana....”

She'd no sooner started, however, than the dream she was having lost its claim on her, and

she began to slip back into a deeper place, her voice losing power as she went.

“Don't stop, Mama,” Gentle prompted. “I want to hear. There was a woman ...”

“Yes...”

”,.. called Nisi Nirvana.”

“Yes. And she went to a city full of iniquities, where no ghost was holy and no flesh was

whole. And something there did a great hurt to her....”

Her voice was getting stronger again, but the smile, even that tiniest hint, had gone.

“What hurt was this, Mama?”

“You needn't know the hurt, child. You'll learn about it one day, and on that day you'll wish

you could forget it. Just understand that it's a hurt only men can do to women.”

“And who did this hurt to her?” Gentle asked.

“I told you, child, a man.”

“But what man?”

“His name doesn't matter. What matters is that she escaped him, and

came back into her

own city, and knew she must make a good thing from this bad that had been done to her.

And do you know what that good thing was?”

“No, Mama.”

“It was a little baby. A perfect little baby. And she loved it so much it grew big after a time,

and she knew it would be leaving her, so she said, 'I have a story to tell you before you go.'

And do you know what the story was? I want you to remember, child.”

“Tell me.”

“There was a woman called Nisi Nirvana. And she went into a city of iniquities —”

“That's the same story, Mama.”

"—where no ghost was holy—”

“You haven't finished the first story. You've just begun again.”

"—and no flesh was whole. And something there—”

“Stop, Mama,” Gentle said. “Stop.”

"—did a great hurt to her....”

Distressed by this loop, Gentle took his hand from his mother's cheek. She didn't halt her

recitation, however; at least not at first. The story went on exactly as it had before: the

escape from the city; the good thing made from the bad; the baby, the perfect little baby. But

with the hand no longer on her cheek Celestine was sinking back into unthinking slumber,

her voice steadily growing more indistinct. Gentle got up and backed away to the door, as

the whispered wheel came full circle again.

“So she said: I have a story to tell you before you go.”

Gentle reached behind him and opened the door, his eyes fixed on his mother as the words

slurred.

“And do you know what the story was?” she said. “I want... you ... to ... remember... child.”

He went on watching her as he slipped out into the hallway. The last sounds he heard

would have been nonsense to any ear other than this, but he'd heard this story often enough

now to know that she was beginning again as she'd dropped into dreamlessness.

“There was a woman once ...”

On that, he closed the door. For some inexplicable reason, he was shaking, and had to

stand at the threshold for several seconds before he could control the tremor. When he

turned, he found Clem at the bottom of the stairs, sorting through a selection of candles.

“Is she still asleep?” he asked as Gentle approached.

“Yes, Has she talked to you at all, Clem?”

“Very little. Why?”

“I've just been listening to her tell a story in her sleep. Something about a woman called

Nisi Nirvana. Do you know what that means?”

“Nisi Nirvana. Unless Heaven. Is that somebody's name?”

“Apparently. And it must mean a lot to her, for some reason. That's the name she sent Jude

with to fetch me.”

“And what's the story?”

“Damn strange,” Gentle said.

“Maybe you liked it better when you were a kid.”

“Maybe.”

“If I hear her talking again, do you want me to call you down?”

“I don't think so,” Gentle said. “I've got it by heart already.”

He started up the stairs.

“You're going to need some candles up there,” Clem said. “And matches to light 'em with.”

“So I am,” Gentle said, turning back.

Clem handed over half a dozen candles, thick, stubby, and white. Gentle handed one of

them back.

“Five's the magic number,” he said.

“I left some food at the top of the stairs,” Clem said as Gentle started to climb again. “It's

not exactly haute cuisine, but it's sustenance. And if you don't claim it now it'll be gone as

soon as the boy gets back.”

Gentle called his thanks back down the flight, picked up the bread, strawberries, and bottle

of beer waiting at the top, then returned to the Meditation Room, closing the door behind

him. Perhaps because he was still preoccupied with what he'd heard from his mother's lips,

the memories of Pie were not waiting at the threshold. The room was empty, a cell of the

present. It wasn't until Gentle had set the candles on the mantelpiece, and was lighting one

of them, that he heard the mystif speaking softly behind him.

"Now I've distressed you," it said.

Gentle turned into the room and found the mystif at the window, where it so often loitered,

with a look of deep concern on its face.

"I shouldn't have asked," Pie went on. "It's just idle curiosity. I heard Abelow asking the

boy Lucius a day or two ago, and it made me wonder."

"What did Lucius say?"

"He said he remembered being suckled. That was the first thing he could recall: the teat at

his mouth."

Only now did Gentle grasp the subject under debate here. Once again his memory had

found some fragment of conversation between himself and the mystif pertinent to his

present concerns. They'd talked of childhood memories in this very room, and the Maestro

had been plunged into the same distress which he felt now; and for the same reason.

"But to remember a story," Pie was saying. "Particularly one you didn't like—"

"It wasn't that I didn't like it," the Maestro said. "At least, it didn't frighten me, the way a

ghost story might have done. It was worse than that....”

“We don't have to talk about this,” Pie said, and for a moment Gentle thought the

conversation was going to fizzle out there. He wasn't altogether certain he'd have minded if

it had. But it seemed to have been one of the unwritten rules of this house that no inquiry

was ever fled from, however discomfiting.

“No, I want to explain if I can,” the Maestro said. “Though what a child fears is sometimes

hard to fathom.”

“Unless we can listen with a child's heart,” Pie said.

“That's harder still.”

“We can try, can't we? Tell me the story.”

“Well, it always began the same way. My mother would say, I want you to remember, child,

and I'd know right away what was going to follow. There was a woman called Nisi Nirvana,

and she went into a city full of iniquities....”

Now Gentle heard the story again, this time from his own lips, told to the mystif. The

woman; the city; the crime; the child; and then, with a sickening inevitability, the story

beginning again with the woman and the city and the crime.

“Rape isn't a very pretty subject for a nursery tale,” Pie observed.

“She never used that word.”

“But that's what the crime is, isn't it?”

“Yes,” he said softly, though he was uncomfortable with the

admission. This was his

mother's secret, his mother's pain. But yes, of course, Nisi Nirvana was Celestine, and the

city of terrors was the First Dominion. She'd told her child her own story, encoded in a grim

little fable. But more bizarrely than that, she'd folded the listener into the tale, and even the

telling of the tale itself, creating a circle impossible to break because all of its constituent

elements were trapped inside. Was it that sense of entrapment that had so distressed him as

a child? Pie had another theory, however, and was voicing it from across the years.

"No wonder you were so afraid," the mystif said, "not knowing what the crime was, but

knowing it was terrible. I'm sure she meant no harm by it. But your imagination must have

run riot."

Gentle didn't reply; or, rather, couldn't. For the first time in these conversations with Pi e

he knew more than history did, and the discontinuity fractured the glass in which he'd been

seeing the past. He felt a bitter sense of loss, adding to the distress he'd carried into this

room. It was as though the tale of Nisi Nirvana marked the divide between the self who'd

occupied these rooms two hundred years before, ignorant of his divinity, and the man he

was now, who knew that the story of Nisi Nirvana was his mother's story, and the crime

she'd told him about was the act that had brought him into being.

There could be no more

dallying in the past after this. He'd learned what he needed to know about the

Reconciliation, and he couldn't justify further loitering. It was time to leave the comfort of

memory, and Pie with it.

He picked up the bottle of beer and struck off the cap. It probably wasn't wise to be

drinking alcohol at this juncture, but he wanted to toast the past before it faded from view

entirely. There must have been a time", he thought, when he and Pie had raised a glass to the

millennium. Could he conjure such a moment now and join his intention with the past one

last time? He raised the bottle to his lips and, as he drank, heard Pie laughing across the

room. He looked in the mystlf's direction, and there, fading already, he caught a glim pse of

his lover, not with a glass in hand but a carafe, . toasting the future. He lifted the beer bottle

to touch the carafe, but the mystif was fading too fast. Before past and present could share

the toast, the vision was gone. It was time to begin.

Downstairs, Monday was back, talking excitedly. Setting the bottle down on the

mantelpiece, Gentle went out onto the landing to find out what all the furor was about. The

boy was at the door, in the middle of describing the state of the city to Clem and Jude. He'd

never seen a stranger Saturday night, he said. The streets were practically empty. The only

thing that was moving was the traffic lights.

“At least we'll have an easy trip,” Jude said.

“Are we going somewhere?”

She told him, and he was well pleased.

“I like it out in the country,” he said. “We can do what the fuck we like.”

“Let's just make it back alive,” she said. “He's relying on us.”

“No problem,” Monday said cheerily. Then, to Clem: “Look after the boss-man, huh? If

things get weird, we can always call on Irish and the rest.”

“Did you tell them where we are?” Clem said.

“They're not going to fetch up lookin' for a bed, don't worry,” Monday said. “But the way I

reckon it, the more friends we got, the better.” He turned to Jude. “I'm ready when you are,”

he said, and headed back outside.

“This shouldn't take more than two or three hours,” Jude told Clem. “Look after yourself.

And him.”

She glanced up the stairs as she spoke, but the candles at the bottom threw too frail a light

to reach the top, and she failed to see Gentle there. It was only when she'd gone from the

step, and the car was roaring away down the street, that he made his presence known.

“Monday's come back,” Clem said.

"I heard."

"Did he disturb you? I'm sorry."

"No, no. I was finished anyway."

"The night's so hot," Clem said, gazing up at the sky.

"Why don't you sleep for a while? I can stand guard."

"Where's that bloody pet of yours?"

"He's called Little Ease, Clem, and he's on the top floor, keeping watch."

"I don't trust him, Gentle."

"He'll do us no harm. Go and lie down."

"Have you finished with Pie?"

"I think I've learned what I can. Now I've got to check on the rest of the Synod."

"How'll you do that?"

"I'll leave my body upstairs and go traveling."

"That sounds dangerous."

"I've done it before. But my flesh and blood'll be vulnerable while I'm out of it."

"As soon as you're ready to go, wake me. I'll watch over you like a hawk."

"Have an hour's nap first."

Clem picked up one of the candles and went to look for a place to lie down, leaving Gentle

to take over his post at the front door. He sat on the step with his head laid against the door

frame and enjoyed what little breeze the night could supply. There were no lamps working

in the street. It was the light of the moon, and the stars in array

around it, that picked out

the details in the house opposite and caught the pale undersides of the leaves when the wind

lifted them. Lulled, he fell into a doze and missed the shooting stars.

“Oh, how beautiful,” the girl said. She couldn't have been more than sixteen, and when she

laughed, which her beau had made her do a lot tonight, she sounded even younger. But she

wasn't laughing now. She was standing in the darkness staring up at the meteor shower,

while Sartori looked on admiringly.

He'd found her three hours earlier, wandering through the Midsummer Fair on Hampstead

Heath, and had easily charmed himself into her company. The fair was doing poor business,

with so few people out and about, so when the rides closed down, which they did at the first

sign of dusk, he talked her into coming into the City with him. They'd buy some wine, he

said, and wander; find a place to sit and talk and watch the stars. It was a long time since

he'd indulged himself in a seduction—Judith had been another kind of challenge entirely—

but the tricks of the trade came back readily enough, and the satisfaction of watching her

resistance crumble, plus the wine he imbibed, did much to assuage the pain of recent

defeats.

The girl—her name was Monica—was both lovely and compliant. She met his gaze only

coily at first, but that was all part of the game, and it contented him to play it for a while, as

a diversion from the coming tragedy. Coy as she was, she didn't reject him when he

suggested they take a stroll around the fields of demolished buildings at the back of

Shiverick Square, though she made some remark about wanting him to treat her carefully. So

he did. They walked together in the darkness until they found a spot where the undergrowth

thinned and made a kind of grove. The sky was clear overhead, and she had a fine, swooning

sight of the meteor shower.

"It always makes me feel a little bit afraid," she told him in a charmless Cockney. "Looking

at the stars, I mean."

"Why's that?"

"Well... we're so small, aren't we?"

He'd asked her earlier to tell him about her life, and she'd volunteered scraps of biography,

first about a boy called Trevor, who'd said he loved her but had gone off with her best

friend; then about her mother's collection of china frogs, and how much she'd like to live in

Spain, because everybody was so much happier there. But now, without prompting, she told

him she didn't care about Spain or Trevor or the china frogs. She was happy, she said; and

the sight of the stars, which usually scared her, tonight made her want to fly, to which he

said that they could indeed fly, together, if she just said the word.

At this she looked away from the sky, with a resigned sigh.

“I know what you want,” she said. “You’re all the same. Flying. Is that your fancy word for

it then?”

He said she’d misunderstood him completely. He hadn’t brought her here to fumble and

fuss with her. That was beneath them both.

“What then?” she said.

He answered her with his hand, too swiftly to be contradicted. The second primal act, after

the one she’d thought he’d brought her here to perform. Her struggles were almost as

resigned as her sigh, and she was dead on the ground in less than a minute. Overhead, the

stars continued to fall in an abundance he remembered from this time two hundred years

before. An unseasonal rain of heavenly bodies, to presage the business of tomorrow night.

He dismembered and disemboweled her with the greatest care and laid the pieces around

the grove in time—honored fashion. There was no need to hurry. This working was better

completed in the bleak moments before dawn, and they were still some hours away. When

they came, and the working was performed, he had high hopes for it. Godolphin’s body had

been cold when he’d used it, and its owner scarcely an innocent. The

creatures he'd tempted

from the In Ovo with such unappetizing bait had therefore been primitive. Monica, on the

other hand, was warm and had not lived long enough to be much soiled. Her death would

open a deeper crack in the In Ovo than Godolphin's, and through it he hoped to draw a

particular species of Oviate uniquely suited for the work tomorrow would bring: a sleek,

bitter-throated kind, that would help him prove, by tomorrow night, what a child born to

destruction could do.

AFTER ALL THAT MONDAY HAD SAID about the state of the city, Jude had expected to find

it completely deserted, but this proved not to be the case. In the time between his returning

from the South Bank and their setting out for the estate, the streets of London, which were

as devoid of romancing tourists and partiers as Monday had claimed, had become the

territory of a third and altogether stranger tribe: that of men and women who had simply

got up out of their beds and gone wandering. Almost all of them were alone, as though

whatever unease had driven them out into the night was too painful to share with their

loved ones. Some were dressed for a day at the office: suits and ties, skirts and sensible

shoes. Others were wearing the minimum for decency: many barefoot, many more bare-

chested. All wandered with the same languid gait, their eyes turned up to scan the sky.

As far as Jude could see, the heavens had nothing untoward to show them. She caught sight

of a few shooting stars, but that wasn't so unusual on a clear summer night. She could only

assume that these people had in their heads the idea that revelation would come from on

high and, having woken with the irrational suspicion that such revelation was imminent, had

gone out to look for it.

The scene was not so different when they reached the suburbs:
ordinary men and women

in their nightclothes, standing at street corners or on their front lawns,
watching the sky.

The phenomenon petered out the farther from the center of London—
from Clerkenwell,

perhaps—they traveled, only to reappear when they reached the
outskirts of the village of

Yoke, where, just a few days before, she and Gentle had stood soaked
in the post office.

Passing down the lanes they'd trudged in the rain reminded her of the
naive ambition she'd

returned into the Fifth bearing: the possibility of some reunion
between Gentle and herself.

Now she was retracing her route with all such hopes dashed, carrying
a child that belonged

to his enemy. Her two-hundred-year courtship with Gentle was finally,
and irredeemably,

over.

The undergrowth around the estate had swelled monstrously, and it
took more than the

switch Estabrook had wielded to clear a way to the gates. Despite the
fact that it was

flourishing, the greenery smelled rank, as if it was decaying as quickly
as it was growing,

and its buds would not be blossoms but rot. Thrashing to left and right
with his knife,

Monday led the way to the gates and through the corrugated iron into
the parkland beyond.

Though it was an hour for moths and owls, the park was swarming
with all manner of

daylight life. Birds circled the air as though misdirected by a change in the poles and blind to

their nests. Gnats, bees, dragonflies, and all the mazing species of a summer's day flitted in

desperate confusion through the moonlit grass. Like the sky gazers in the streets they'd

passed through, Nature sensed imminence and could not rest.

Jude's own sense of direction served her well, however. Though the copses scattered ahead

of them looked much the same in the blue-gray light, she fixed upon the Retreat, and they

trudged towards it, slowed by the muddy ground and the thickness of the grass. Monday

whistled as he went, with that same blissful indifference to melody that Clem had remarked

upon a few hours before.

"Do you know what's going to happen tomorrow?" Jude asked him, almost envious of his

strange serenity.

"Yeah, sort of," he said. "There's these heavens, see? And the boss is going to let us go

there. It's going to be amazin."

"Aren't you afraid?" she said.

"What of?"

"Everything's going to change."

"Good," he said. "I'm fucked off with the way things are." Then he picked up the thread of

his whistle again and headed on through the grass for another hundred yards, until a sound

more insistent than his din silenced him.

“Listen to that.”

The activity in the air and the grass had steadily increased as they approached the copse,

but with the wind blowing in the opposite direction the din of such an assembly as was

gathered there had not been audible until now.

“Birds and bees,” Monday remarked. “And a fuck of a lot of 'em.”

As they continued their advance, the scale of the parliament ahead steadily became more

apparent. Though the moonlight did not pierce the foliage very deeply, it was clear that

every branch of every tree around the Retreat, to the tiniest twiglet, was occupied with

birds. The smell of their massing pricked their nostrils; its din, their ears.

“We're going to get our heads right royally shat on,” Monday said. “Either that or we'll get

stung to death.”

The insects were by now a living veil between them and the copse, so thick that they gave

up attempting to flail it aside after a few strides and bore the deaths on their brows and

cheeks, and the countless flutterings in their hair, in order to pick up speed and dash for

their destination. There were birds in the grass now, commoners among the parliament,

denied a seat on the branches. They rose in a squawking cloud before the runners, and their

alarm caused consternation in the trees. A thunderous ascent began,
the mass of life so vast

that the violence of its motion beat the tender leaves down. By the
time Jude and Monday

reached the corner of the copse, they were running through a double
rain: one green and

falling, the other rising and feathered.

Picking up her pace, Jude overtook Monday and headed around the
Retreat—the walls of

which were black with insects—to the door. At the threshold, she
halted. There was a small

fire burning inside, built close to the edge of the mosaic.

“Some bugger got here first,” Monday remarked.

“I don't see anyone.”

He pointed to a bundle lying on the floor beyond the fire. His eyes,
more accustomed than

hers to seeing life in rags, had found the fire maker. She stepped into
the Retreat, knowing

before he raised his head who this creature was. How could she not?
Three times before—

once here, once in Yzordderrex, and once, most recently, in the Tabula
Rasa's tower —this

man had made an unexpected arrival, as though to prove what he'd
claimed not so long ago:

that their lives would be perpetually interwoven, because they were
the same.

“Dowd?”

He didn't move.

“Knife,” she said to Monday.

He passed it over and, armed, she advanced across the Retreat towards the bundle. Dowd's

hands were crossed on his chest, as though he expected to expire where he lay. His eyes

were closed, but they were the only part of his face that was. Almost every other inch had

been laid open by Celestine's assault, and despite his legendary powers of recuperation he'd

been unable to make good the damage done. He was unmasked to the bone. Yet he breathed,

albeit weakly, and moaned to himself now and then, as though dreaming of punishment or

revenge. She was half tempted to kill him in his sleep and have this bitter business brought

to an end on the spot. But she was curious to know why he was here. Had he attempted to

return to Yzordderrex, and failed, or was he expecting someone to come back this way and

meet him here? Either could be significant in these volatile times, and though in her present

venomous state she felt perfectly capable of dispatching him, he'd always been an agent in

the dealings of greater souls and might still have some fragment of use as a messenger. She

went down on her haunches beside him and spoke his name above the din of birds coming

back to roost on the roof. He opened his eyes only slowly, adding their glisten to the wetness

of his features.

"Look at you," he said. "You're radiant, lovey." It was a line from a boulevard comedy, and

despite his wretched condition he spoke it with elan. "I, of course, look like ordure. Will you

come closer to me? I don't have the energy for volume."

She hesitated to comply. Though he was on the verge of extinction, he had boundless

capacity for malice in him and, with the Pivot's sloughings still fixed in his flesh, the power

to do harm.

"I can hear you perfectly well where I am," she said.

"I'm good for a hundred words at this volume," he bargained. "Twice that at a whisper."

"What have we got left to say to each other?"

"Ah," he said. "So much. You think you've heard everybody's stories, don't you? Mine.

Sartori's. Godolphin's. Even the Reconciler's, by now. But you're missing one."

"Oh, am I?" she said, not much caring. "Whose is that?"

"Come closer."

"I'll hear it from here or not at all."

He looked at her beadily. "You're a bitch, you really are."

"And you're wasting words. If you've got something to say, say it. Whose story am I

missing?"

He bided his time before replying, to squeeze what little drama he could out of this.

Finally, he said, "The Father's."

"What father?"

“Is there more than one? Hapexamendios. The Aboriginal. The Unbeheld. He of the First

Dominion.”

“You don't know that story,” she said.

He reached up with sudden speed, and his hand was clamped around her arm before she

could move out of range. Monday saw the attack and came running, but she halted him

before he plowed into Dowd and sent him back to sit by the fire.

“It's all right,” she told him. “He's not going to hurt me. Are you?” She studied Dowd. “Well,

are you?” she said again. “You can't afford to lose me. I'm the last audience you'll have, and

you know it. If you don't tell this story to me, you're not going to tell it to anybody. Not this

side of Hell.”

The man quietly conceded her point. “True,” he said.

“So tell. Unburden yourself.”

He drew a laborious breath; then he began.

“I saw Him once, you know,” he said. “The Father of the Imajica. He came to me in the

desert.”

“He appeared in person, did He?” she said, her skepticism plain.

“Not exactly. I heard Him speaking out of the First. But I saw hints, you know, in the

Erasure.”

“And what did He look like?”

“Like a man, from what I could see.”

“Or what you imagined.”

“Maybe I did,” Dowd said. “But I didn't imagine what He told me—”

“That He'd raise you up. Make you His procurer. You've told me all this before, Dowd.”

“Not all of it,” he said. “When I'd seen Him, I came back to the Fifth, using feits He'd

whispered to me to cross the In Ovo, and I searched the length and breadth of London for a

woman to be blessed among women.”

“And you found Celestine?”

“Yes. I found Celestine—at Tyburn, as a matter of fact— watching a hanging. I don't know

why I chose her. Perhaps because she laughed so hard when the man kissed the noose, and I

thought, She's no sentimentalist, this woman; she won't weep and wail if she's taken into

another Dominion. She wasn't beautiful, even then, but she had a clarity, you know? Some

actresses have it. The great ones, anyway. A face that could carry extremes of emotion and

not look bathetic. Maybe I was a little infatuated with her....” He shivered. “I was capable of

that when I was younger. So ... I made myself known to her, and told her I wanted to show

her a living dream, the like of which she'd never forget. She resisted at first, but I could have

talked the face off the moon in those days, and she let me drug her with sways and take her

away. It was a hell of a journey. Four months, across the Dominions. But I got her there

eventually, back to the Erasure....”

“And what happened?”

“It opened.”

“And?”

“I saw the City of God.”

Here at least was something she wanted to know about. “What was it like?” she said.

“It was just a glimpse—”

Having denied him her proximity for so long, she leaned towards him and repeated her

question inches from his ravaged face. “What was it like?”

“Vast and gleaming and exquisite.”

“Gold?”

“All colors. But it was just a glimpse. Then the walls seemed to burst, and something

reached for Celestine and took her.”

“Did you see what it was?”

“I’ve tried to remember, over and over. Sometimes I think it was like a net; sometimes like

a cloud. I don’t know. Whatever it was, it took her.”

“You tried to help her, of course,” Jude said.

“No, I shat my pants and crawled away. What could I do? She belonged to God. And in the

long run, wasn’t she the lucky one?”

“Abducted and raped?”

“Abducted, raped, and made a little divine. Whereas I, who’d done all

the work, what was

I?"

"A pimp."

"Yes. A pimp. Anyway, she's had her revenge," he said sourly. "Look at me! She's had more

than enough."

That was true. The life both Oscar and Quaisoir had failed to extinguish in Dowd, Celestine

had virtually put out.

"So that's the Father's tale?" Jude said. "I've heard most of it before."

"That's the tale. But what's the moral?"

"You tell me."

He shook his head slightly. "I don't know whether you're mocking or not"

"I'm listening, aren't I? Be grateful for small mercies. You could be lying here without an

audience."

"Well, that's part of it, isn't it? I'm not. You could have come here when I was dead. You

could maybe not have come here at all. But our lives have collided one last time. That's fate's

way of telling me to unburden myself."

"Of what?"

"I'll tell you." Again, a labored breath. "All these years I've wondered: Why did God pluck a

scabby little actor chappie up out of the dirt and send him across three Dominions to fetch

Him a woman?"

“He wanted a Reconciler.”

“And He couldn't find a wife in His own city?” Dowd said. “Isn't that a little odd? Besides,

why does He care whether the Imajica's Reconciled or not?”

Now that was a good question, she thought. Here was a God who'd sealed Himself away in

His own city, and showed no desire to lower the wall between His Dominion and the rest, yet

went to immense lengths to breed a child who would bring all such walls tumbling down.

“It's certainly strange,” she said.

“I'd say so.”

“Have you got any answers to any of this?”

“Not really. But I think He must have some purpose, don't you, or why go to all this

trouble?”

“A plot...”

“Gods don't plot. They create. They protect. They proscribe.”

“So which is He doing?”

“That's the nub of it. Maybe you can find out. Maybe the other Reconcilers already did.”

“The others?”

“The sons He sent before Sartori. Maybe they realized what He was up to, and they defied

Him.”

There was a thought.

“Maybe Christos didn't die saving mortal man from his sins—”

“But from his Father?”

“Yes.”

She thought of the scenes she'd glimpsed in the Boston Bowl—the terrible spectacle of the

city, and most likely the Dominion, overwhelmed by a great darkness—and her body, that

had been driven to fits and convulsions by the torments visited upon her, grew suddenly

still. There was no panic, no frenzy: just a deep, cold dread.

“What do I do?”

“I don't know, lovey. You're free to do whatever you like, remember?”

A few hours before, sitting on the step with Clem, her lack of a place in the Gospel of

Reconciliation had depressed her spirits. But now it seemed that fact offered her some frail

thread of hope. As Dowd had been so eager to claim at the tower, she belonged to no one.

The Godolphins were dead, and so was Quaisoir. Gentle had gone to walk in the footsteps of

Christos, and Sartori was either out building his New Yzordderrex or digging a hole to die in.

She was on her own, and in a world in which everyone else was blinded by obsession and

obligation, that was a significant condition. Perhaps only she could see this story remotely

now and make a judgment unswayed by fealty.

“This is some choice,” she said.

“Perhaps you'd better forget I even spoke, lovely,” Dowd said. His voice was becoming

frailer by the phrase, but he preserved as best he could his jaunty tone. "It's just gossip frqm

an actor chappie."

"If I try and stop the Reconciliation—"

"You'll be flying in the face of the Father, the Son, and probably the Holy Ghost as well."

"And if I don't?"

"You take the responsibility for whatever happens."

"Why?"

"Because"—the power in his voice was now so diminished the sound of the fire he'd built

was louder—"because I think only you can stop it."

As he spoke, his hand lost its grip on her arm. "Well..." he said, "that's done...." His eyes

began to flicker closed.

"One last thing, lovey?" he said.

"Yes?"

"It's maybe asking too much ..."

"What is?"

"I wonder ... could you ... forgive me? I know it's absurd ... but I don't want to die with yo u

despising me."

She thought of the cruel scene he'd played with Quaisoir, when her sister had asked for

some kindness. While she hesitated, he began whispering again.

"We were ... just a little ... the same, you know?"

At this, she put out her hand to touch him and offer what comfort she could, but before her

fingers reached him his breath stopped and his eyes flickered closed.

Jude let out a tiny moan. Against all reason, she felt a pang of loss at Dowd's passing.

"Is something wrong?" Monday said.

She stood up. "That rather depends on your point of view," she said, borrowing an air of

comedic fatalism from the man at her feet. It was a tone worth rehearsing. She might need it

quite a bit in the next few hours, "Can you spare a cigarette?" she asked Monday.

Monday fished out his pack and lobbed it over. She took one and threw the pack back as

she returned to the fire, stooping to pluck up a burning twig to light the tobacco.

"What happened to fella, m'lad?"

"He's dead."

"So what do we do now?"

What indeed? If ever a road divided, it was here. Should she prevent the Reconciliation—it

wouldn't be difficult; the stones were at her feet—and let history call her a destroyer for

doing so? Or should she let it proceed and risk an end to all histories, and futures too?

"How long till it's light?" she asked Monday.

The watch he was wearing had been part of the booty he'd brought back to Gamut Street

on his first trip. He consulted it with a flourish. "Two and a half hours," he said.

There was so little time to act, and littler still to decide on a course.
Returning to

Clerkenwell with Monday was a cul-de-sac; that at least was certain.
Gentle was the

Unbeheld's agent in this, and he wasn't going to be diverted from his
Father's business now,

especially on the word of a man like Dowd, who'd spent his life a
stranger to truth. He'd

argue that this confession had been Dowd's revenge on the living: a
last desperate attempt

to spoil a glory he knew he couldn't share. And maybe that was true;
maybe she'd been

duped.

"Are we going to collect these stones or what?" Monday said.

"I think we have to," she said, still musing.

"What are they for?"

"They're . . . like stepping stones," she said, her voice losing
momentum as a thought

distracted her.

Indeed they were stepping stones. They were a way back to
Yzordderrex, which suddenly

seemed like an open road, along which she might yet find some
guidance, in these last hours,

to help her make a choice.

She threw her cigarette down into the embers. "You're going to have
to take the ston es

back to Gamut Street on your own, Monday."

"Where are you going?"

"To Yzordderrex."

“Why?”

“It's too complicated to explain. You just have to swear to me that you'll do exactly as I tell

you.”

“I'm ready,” he said.

“All right. So listen up. When I'm gone I want you to take the stones back to Gamut Street

and carry a message along with them. It has to go to Gentle personally, you understand?

Don't trust anybody else with it. Even Clem.”

“I understand,” Monday said, beaming with pleasure at this unlooked—for honor. “What

have I got to tell him?”

“Where I've gone, for one thing.”

“Yzordderrex.”

“That's right.”

“Then tell him”—she pondered for a moment—“tell him the Reconciliation isn't safe, and

he mustn't start the working until I contact him again.”

“It isn't safe, and he mustn't start the working—”“—until I contact him again.”

“I've got that. Is there any more?”

“That's it,” she said. “Now, all I've got to do is find the circle.”

She started to scan the mosaic, looking for the subtle differences in tone that marked the

stones. From past experience, she knew that once they'd been lifted from their niches the

Yzordderrexian Express would be under way, so she told Monday to

wait outside until she'd

gone. He looked worried now, but she told him she'd come to no harm.

"It's not that," he said, "I want to know what the message means. If you're telling the boss

it's not safe, does that mean he won't open the Dominions?"

"I don't know."

"But I want to see Patashoqua and L'Himby and Yzordderrex," he said, listing the places

like charms.

"I know that," she said. "And believe me, I want the Dominions opened just as much as you

do."

She studied his face in the dying firelight, looking for some clue as to whether he was being

placated, but for all his youth he was a master of concealment. She'd have to trust that he'd

put his duties as a messenger above his desire to see the Imajica and relay the spirit of her

warning, if not its precise text.

"You've got to make Gentle understand the danger he's in," she said, hoping this tack

would make him conscientious.

"I will," he said, now faintly irritated by her insistence.

She let the subject lie and returned to the business of finding the stones. He didn't offer his

assistance, but retreated to the door, from which he said, "How will you get back?"

She'd found four of the stones already, and the birds on the roof had set up a fresh

cacophony, suggesting that they felt some tremor of change below.

"I'll deal with that problem when I get to it," she replied.

The birds suddenly rose up and, unnerved, Monday stepped out of the Retreat altogether.

Jude glanced up at him as she dug out another stone. The fire between them had already

been fanned into flame, and now its ashes were stirred up, rising in a smutty cloud to hide

the door from view. She scanned the mosaic, checking to see if she'd missed a stone, but the

itches and aches she remembered from her first crossing were already creeping through her

body, proof that the passing place was about its work.

Oscar had told her, on this very spot, that the discomforts of passage diminished with

repetition, and his words proved correct. She had time, as the walls blurred around her, to

glimpse the door through the swirling ash and realize, all too late, that she should have

looked out at the world one last time before leaving it. Then the Retreat disappeared, and

the In Ovo's delirium was oppressing her, its prisoners rising in their legions to claim her.

Traveling alone, she went more quickly than she had with Oscar (at least that was her

impression), and she was out the other side before the Oviates had time to sniff the heels of

her glyph.

The walls of the merchant Peccable's cellar were brighter than she remembered them. The

reason: a lamp which burned on the floor a yard from the circle and beyond it a figure, its

face a blur, which came at her with a bludgeon and laid her unconscious on the floor before

she'd uttered a word of explanation.

18 The mantle of night was falling on the Fifth Dominion, and Gentle found Tick Raw near the

summit of the Mount of Lipper Bayak, watching the last dusky colors of day drop from the

sky. He was eating while he did so, a bowl each of sausage and pickle between his feet and a

large pot of mustard between these, into which meat and vegetable alike were plunged;

Though Gentle had come here as a projection—his body left sitting crosslegged in the

Meditation Room in Gamut Street—he didn't need nose or palate to appreciate the piquancy

of Raw's meal; imagination sufficed.

He looked up when Gentle approached, unperturbed by the phantom watching him eat.

"You're early, aren't you?" he remarked, glancing at his pocket watch, which hung from his

coat on a piece of string. "We've got hours yet."

"I know. I just came—"

"—to check up on me," Tick Raw said, the sting of pickle in his voice. "Well, I'm here. Are

you ready in the Fifth?"

"We're getting there," Gentle said, somewhat queasily.

Though he'd traveled this way countless times as the Maestro Sartori—his mind,

empowered by feits, carrying his image and his voice across the Dominions—and had

reacquainted himself with the technique easily enough, the sensation was damn strange.

“What do I look like?” he asked Tick Raw, remembering as he spoke how he'd attempted to

describe the mystif on these very slopes.

“Insubstantial,” Tick Raw replied, squinting up at him, then returning to his meal. “Which

is fine by me, because there's not enough sausage for two.”

“I'm still getting used to what I'm capable of.”

“Well, don't take too long about it,” Tick Raw said. “We've got work to do.”

“And I should have realized that you were part of that work when I was first here, but I

didn't, and for that I apologize.”

“Accepted,” Tick Raw said.

“You must have thought I was crazy.”

“You certainly—how shall I put this? — you certainly confounded me. It took me days to

work out why you were so damn obstreperous. Pie talked to me, you know, tried to make me

understand. But I'd been waiting for somebody to come from the Fifth for so long I was only

listening with half an ear.”

“I think Pie probably hoped my meeting with you would make me

remember who the hell I

was.”

“How long did it take?”

“Months.”

“Was it the mystif who hid you from yourself in the first place?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, it did too good a job. That'll teach it. Where's your flesh and blood, by the way?”

“Back in the Fifth.”

“Take my advice, don't leave it too long. I find the bowels mutiny, and you come back to

find you're sitting in shite. Of course, that could be a personal weakness.”

He selected another sausage and chewed on it as he asked Gentle why the hell he'd let the

mystif make him forget.

“I was a coward,” Gentle replied. “I couldn't face my failure.”

“It's hard,” Tick Raw said. “I've lived all these years wondering if I could have saved my

Maestro, Uter Musky, if I'd been quicker witted. I still miss him.”

“I'm responsible for what happened to him, and I've no excuses.”

“We've all got our frailties, Maestro: my bowels; your cowardice. None of us is perfect. But

I presume your being here means we're finally going to have another try?”

“That's my intention, yes.”

Again, Tick Raw looked at his watch, doing a mute calculation as he chewed. “Twenty of

your Fifth Dominion hours from now, or thereabouts.”

“That's right.”

“Well, you'll find me ready,” he said, consuming a sizable pickle in one bite.

“Do you have anyone to help you?”

His mouth full, all Tick could manage was: “on't 'eed un.” He chewed on, then swallowed.

“Nobody even knows I'm here,” he explained. “I'm still wanted by the law, even though I

hear Yzordderrex is in ruins.”

“It's true.”

“I also hear the Pivot's quite transformed,” Tick Raw said. “Is that right?”

“Into what?”

“Nobody can get near enough to find out,” he replied. “But if you're planning to check on

the whole Synod—”

“I am.”

“Then maybe you'll see for yourself while you're in the city. There was a Eurhetemec

representing the Second, if I remember—”

“He's dead.”

“So who's there now?”

“I'm hoping Scopique's found someone.”

“He's in the Third, isn't he? At the Pivot pit?”

“That's right.”

“And who's at the Erasure?”

“A man called Chicka Jackeen.”

“I’ve never heard of him,” Tick Raw said. “Which is odd. I get to hear about most Maestros.

Are you sure he’s a Maestro?”

“Certainly.”

Tick Raw shrugged. “I’ll meet him in the Ana then. And don’t worry about me, Sa rtori. I’ll

be here.”

“I’m glad we’ve made our peace.”

“I fight over food and women but never metaphysics,” Tick Raw said. “Besides, we’ve

joined in a great mission. This time tomorrow you’ll be able to walk home from here!”

Their exchange ended on that optimistic note, and Gentle left Tick to his night watch,

heading with a thought towards the Kwem, where he hoped to find Scopique keeping his

place beside the site of the Pivot. He would have been there in the time it took to think

himself over the border between Dominions, but he allowed his journey to be diverted by

memory. His thoughts turned to Beatrix as he left the Mount of Lipper Bayak, and it was

there rather than the Kwem his spirit flew to, arriving on the outskirts of the village.

It was night here too, of course. Doeki lowed softly on the dark slopes around him, their

neck bells tinkling. Beatrix itself was silent, however, the lamps that had flickered in the

groves around the houses gone, and the children who'd tended them gone too: all

extinguished. Distressed by this melancholy sight, Gentle almost fled the village there and

then, but that he glimpsed a single light in the distance and, advancing a little way, saw a

figure he recognized crossing the street, his lamp held high. It was Coaxial Tas ko, the hermit

of the hill who'd granted Pie and Gentle the means to dare the Jokalaylau. Tasko paused,

halfway across the street, and raised his lamp, peering out into the darkness.

"Is somebody there?" he asked.

Gentle wanted to speak—to make his peace, as he had with Tick Raw, and to talk about the

promise of tomorrow—but the expression on Tasko's face forbade him. The hermit wouldn't

thank him for apologies, Gentle thought, or for talk of a bright new day. Not when there were

so many who'd never see it. If Tasko had some inkling of his visitor, he also judged a meeting

pointless. He simply shuddered, lowered his lamp, and moved on about his business.

Gentle didn't linger another minute, but turned his face up towards the mountains and

thought himself away, not just from Beatrix but from the Dominion. The village vanished,

and the dusty daylight of the Kwem appeared around him. Of the four sites where he hoped

to find his fellow Maestros—the Mount, the Kwem, the Eurhetemec Kesparate, and the

Erasure—this was the only one he hadn't visited in his travels with Pie, and he'd been

prepared to have some difficulty locating the spot. But Scopique's presence was a beacon in

this wasteland. Though the wind raised blinding clouds of dust, he found the man within a

few moments of his arrival, squatting in the shelter of a primitive blind, constructed from a

few blankets hung on poles which were stuck in the gray earth.

Uncomfortable though it was, Scopique had suffered worse privations in his life as a

seditionist—not least his incarceration in the maison de sante—and when he rose to meet

Gentle it was with the brio of a fit and contented man. He was dressed immaculately in a

three—piece suit and bow tie, and his face, despite the peculiarity of his features (the nose

that was barely two holes in his head, the popping eyes), was much less pinched than it had

been, his cheeks made florid by the gritty wind. Like Tick Raw, he was expecting his visitor.

“Come in! Come in!” he said. “Not that you're feeling the wind much, eh?”

Though this was true (the wind blew through Gentle in the most curious way, eddying

around his navel), he joined Scopique in the lee of his blankets, and there they sat down to

talk. As ever, Scopique had a good deal to say and poured his tales and observations out in a

seamless monologue. He was ready, he said, to represent this Dominion in the sacred space

of the Ana, though he wondered how the equilibrium of the working would be affected by

the absence of the Pivot. It had been set at the center of the Five Dominions, he reminded

Gentle, to be a conduit, and perhaps an interpreter, of power through the Imajica. Now it

was gone, and the Third was undoubtedly the weaker for its removal.

“Look,” he said, standing up and leading his phantom visitor out to the tip of the pit. “I’m

left conjuring beside a hole in the ground!”

“And you think that’ll affect the working?”

“Who knows? We’re all amateurs pretending to be experts. All I can do is cleanse the place

of its previous oco > pant and hope for the best.”

He directed Gentle’s attention away from the pit, to the smoking shell of a sizable building,

which was only occasionally visible through the dust.

“What was that?” Gentle asked.

“The bastard’s palace.”

“And who destroyed it?”

“I did, of course,” Scopique said. “I didn’t want his handiwork looming over our working.

This is going to be a delicate operation as it is, without his filthy influence fucking it up. It

looked like a bordello!” He turned his back on it. “We should have had months to prepare for

this, not hours.”

“I realize that—”

“And then there's the problem of the Second. You know Pie charged me with finding a

replacement? I'd have liked to discuss all of this with you, of course, but when we last met

you were in a fugue state, and Pie forbade me to acquaint you with who you were, though—

may I be honest?”

“Could I stop you?”

“No. I was sorely tempted to slap you out of it.” Scopique looked at Gentle fiercely, as

though he might have done so now, if Gentle had been material enough. “You caused the

mystif so much grief, you .know,” he said. “And like a damned fool it loved you anyway.”

“I had my reasons,” Gentle said softly. “But you were talking about this replacement —”

“Ah, yes. Athanasius.”

“Athanasius?”

“He's now our man in Yzordderrex, representing the Second. Don't look so appalled. He

knows the ceremony, and he's completely committed to it.”

“There's not a sane bone in his body, Scopique. He thought I was Hapexamendios' agent.”

“Well, of course, that's nonsense—”

“He tried to kill me with Madonnas. He's crazy!”

“We've all had our moments, Sartori.”

“Don't call me that.”

“Athanasius is one of the most holy men I've ever met.”

“How can he believe in the Holy Mother one moment and claim he's Jesus the next?”

“He can believe in his own mother, can't he?”

“Are you seriously saying—”

”—that Athanasius is literally the resurrected Christos? No. If we have to have a Messiah

among us, I vote for you.” He sighed. — “Look, I realize you have difficulties with Athanasius,

but I ask you, who else was I to find? There aren't that many Maestros left, Sartori.” “I told

you—”

“Yes, yes, you don't like the name. Well, forgive me, but for as long as I live you'll be the

Maestro Sartori, and if you want to find somebody else to sit here instead of me, who'll call

you something prettier, find him.”

“Were you always this bloody-minded?” Gentle replied.

“No,” said Scopique. “It's taken years of practice.”

Gentle shook his head in despair. “Athanasius. It's a nightmare.”

“Don't be so sure he hasn't got the spirit of Jesu in him, by the way,” Scopique said.

“Stranger things have been known.”

“Any more of this,” Gentle said, “and I'll be as crazy as he is. Athanasius! This is a disaster!”

Furious, he left Scopique at the blind and moved off through the dust, trailing imprecations

as he went, the optimism with which he'd set out on his journey severely bruised. Rather

than appear in front of Athanasius with his thoughts so chaotic, he

found a spot on the

Lenten Way to ponder. The situation was far from encouraging. Tick Raw was holding his

position on the Mount as an outlaw, still in danger of arrest. Scopique was in doubt as to the

efficacy of his place now that the Pivot had been removed. And now, of all people to join the

Synod, Athanasius, a man without the wit to come out of the rain.

“Oh, God, Pie,” Gentle murmured to himself. “I need you now.”

The wind blew mournfully along the highway as he loitered, gusting towards the place of

passage between the Third and Second Dominions, as if to usher him with it, on towards

Yzordderrex. But he resisted its coaxing, taking time to examine the options available to

him. There were, he decided, three. One, to abandon the Reconciliation right away, before

the frailties he saw in the system were compounded and brought on another tragedy. Two,

to find a Maestro who could replace Athanasius. Three, to trust Scopique's judgment and go

into Yzordderrex to make his peace with the man. The first of these options was not to be

seriously countenanced. This was his Father's business, and he had a sacred duty to perform

it. The second, the finding of a replacement for Athanasius, was impractical in the time

remaining. Which left the third. It was unpalatable, but it seemed to be unavoidable. He'd

have to accept Athanasius into the Synod.

The decision made, he succumbed to the message of the gusts and at a thought went with

them, along the straight road, through the gap between the Dominions, and across the delta

into the city-god's entrails.

“Hoi-Polloi?”

Peccable's daughter had put down her bludgeon and was kneeling beside Jude with tears

pouring from her crossed eyes.

“I'm sorry, I'm so sorry,” she kept saying. “I didn't know. I didn't know.”

Jude sat up. A team of bell ringers was tuning up between her temples, but she was

otherwise unharmed. “What are you doing here?” she asked Hoi-Polloi. “I thought you'd

gone with your father.”

“I did,” she explained, fighting the tears. “But I lost him at the causeway. There were so

many people trying to find a way over. One minute he was beside me, and the next h e'd

vanished. I stayed there for hours, looking for him; then I thought he'd be bound to come

back here, to the house, so I came back too—”

“But he wasn't here.”

“No.”

She started to sob again, and Jude put her arms around her, murmuring condolences.

“I'm sure he's still alive,” Hoi-Polloi said. “He's just being sensible and staying under cover.

It's not safe out there." She cast a nervous glance up towards the cellar roof. "If he doesn't

come back after a few days, maybe you can take me to the Fifth, and he can follow."

"It's no safer there than it is here, believe me."

"What's happening to the world?" Hoi-Polloi wanted to know.

"It's changing," Jude said. "And we have to be ready for the changes, however strange they

are."

"I just want things the way they were: Poppa, and the business, and everything in its

place—"

"Tulips on the dining room table."

"Yes."

"It's not going to be that way for quite a while," Jude said. "In fact, I'm not sure it'll ever be

that way again." She got to her feet.

"Where are you going?" Hoi-Polloi said. "You can't leave."

"I'm afraid I've got to. I came here to work. If you want to come with me, you're welcome,

but you'll have to be responsible for yourself."

Hoi-Polloi sniffed hard. "I understand," she said.

"Will you come?"

"I don't want to be alone," she replied. "I'll come."

Jude had been prepared for the scenes of devastation awaiting them beyond the door of

Peccable's house, but not for the sense of rapture that accompanied them. Though there

were sounds of lamentation rising from somewhere nearby, and that grief was doubtless

being echoed in innumerable houses across the city, there was another message on the

balmy noonday air.

“What are you smiling at?” Hoi-Polloi asked her.

She hadn't been aware she was doing so, until the girl pointed it out.

“I suppose because it feels like a new day,” she said, aware as she spoke that it was also

very possibly the last. Perhaps this brightness in the city's air was its acknowledgement of

that: the final remission of a sickened soul before decline and collapse.

She voiced none of this to Hoi-Polloi, of course. The girl was already terrified enough. She

walked a step behind Jude as they climbed the street, her fretful murmurs punctuated by

hiccups. Her distress would have been pro-founder still if she'd been able to sense the

confusion in Jude, who had no clue, now that she was here, as to where to find the

instruction she'd come in search of. The city was no longer a labyrinth of enchantments, if

indeed it had ever been that. It was a virtual wasteland, its countless fires now guttering out

but leaving a pall overhead. The comet's light pierced these grimy skirts in several places,

however, and where its beams fell won color from the air, like fragments of stained glass

shimmering in solution above the griefs below.

Having no better place to head for, Jude directed them towards the nearest of these spots,

which was no more than half a mile away. Long before they'd reached the place, a faint

drizzle was carried their way by the breeze, and the sound of running water announced the

phenomenon's source. The street had cracked open, and either a burst water main or a

spring was bubbling up from the tarmac. The sight had brought a number of spectators from

the ruins, though very few were venturing close to the water, their fear not of the uncertain

ground but of something far stranger. The water issuing from the crack was not running

away down the hill but up it, leaping the steps that occasionally broke the slope with a

salmon's zeal. The only witnesses unafraid of this mystery were the children, several of

whom had wrested themselves from their parents' grip and were playing in the law-defying

stream, some running in it, others sitting in the water to let it play over their legs. In the

little shrieks they uttered, Jude was sure she heard a note of sexual pleasure.

"What is this?" Hoi-Polloi said, her tone more offended than astonished, as though the sight

had been laid on as a personal affront to her.

"Why don't we follow it and find out?" Jude replied.

"Those children are going to drown," Hoi-Polloi observed, somewhat primly.

"In two inches of water? Don't be ridiculous."

With this, Jude set off, leaving Hoi-Polloi to follow if she so wished.
She apparently did,

because she once again fell into step behind Jude, her hiccups now
abated, and they climbed

in silence until, two hundred yards or more from where they'd first
encountered the stream,

a second appeared, this from another direction entirely and large
enough to carry a light

freight from the lower slopes. The bulk of the cargo was debris—items
of clothing, a few

drowned graveolents, some slices of burned bread—but among this
trash were objects

clearly set upon the stream to be carried wherever it was going: boat
missives of carefully

folded paper; small wreaths of woven grass, set with tiny flowers; a
doll laid on a little flood

in a shroud of ribbons.

Jude plucked one of the paper boats out of the water and unfolded it.
The writing inside

was smeared but legible.

Tishalulle, the letter read. My name is Cimarra Sakeo. I send this
prayer for my mother

and for my father, and for my brother, Boem, who is dead. I have seen
you in dreams,

Tishalulle, and know you are good. You are in my heart. Please be
also in the hearts of my

mother and father, and give them your comfort.

Jude passed the letter over to Hoi-Polloi, her gaze following the
course of the married

streams.

“Who's Tishalulle?” she asked.

Hoi-Polloi didn't reply. Jude glanced around at her, to find that the girl was staring up the hill.

“Tishalulli?” Jude said again.

“She's a Goddess,” Hoi-Polloi replied, her voice lowered although there was nobody within

earshot. She dropped the letter onto the ground as she spoke, but Jude stooped to pick it up.

“We should be careful of people's prayers,” she said, refolding the boat and letting it return

to its voyage.

“She'll never get it,” Hoi-Polloi said. “She doesn't exist.”

“Yet you refuse to say her name out loud.”

“We're not supposed to name any of the Goddesses. Poppa taught us that. It's forbidden.”

“There are others, then?”

“Oh, yes. There's the sisters of the Delta. And Poppa said there's even one called

Jokalaylau, who lived in the mountains.”

“Where does Tishalulle come from?”

“The Cradle of Chzercemit, I think. I'm not sure.”

“The Cradle of what?”

“It's a lake in the Third Dominion.”

This time, Jude knew she was smiling. “Rivers, snows, and lakes,” she said, going down on

her haunches beside the stream and putting her fingers into it.

“They've come in the waters,

Hoi-Polloi.”

“Who have?”

The stream was cool and played against Jude's fingers, leaping up against her palm. “Don't

be obtuse,” she said. “The Goddesses. They're here.”

“That's impossible. Even if they still existed—and Poppa told me they don't—why would

they come here?”

Jude lifted a cupped handful of water to her lips and supped. It tasted sweet. “Perhaps

somebody called them,” she said. She looked at Hoi-Polloi, whose face was still registering

her distaste at what Jude had just done.

“Somebody up there?” the girl said.

“Well, it takes a lot of effort to climb a hill,” Jude said. “Especially for water. It's not

heading up there because it likes the view. Somebody's pulling it. And if we go with it,

sooner or later—”

“I don't think we should do that,” Hoi-Polloi replied.

“It's not just the water that's being called,” Jude said. “We are too. Can't you feel it?”

“No,” the girl said bluntly. “I could turn around now and go back home.”

“Is that what you want to do?”

Hoi-Polloi looked at the river running a yard from her foot. As luck would have it, the

water was carrying some of its less lovely cargo past them: a flotilla of

chicken heads and

the partially incinerated carcass of a small dog.

“You drank that,” Hoi-Polloi said.

“It tasted fine,” Jude said, but looked away as the dog went by.

The sight had confirmed Hoi-Polloi in her unease. “I think I will go home,” she said. “I’m

not ready to meet Goddesses, even if they are up there. I’ve sinned too much.”

“That’s absurd,” said Jude. “This isn’t about sin and forgiveness. That kind of nonsense is

for the men. This is ...” she faltered, uncertain of the vocabulary, then said, “This is wiser

than that.”

“How do you know?” Hoi-Polloi replied. “Nobody really understands these things. Even

Poppa. He used to tell me he knew how the comet was made, but he didn’t. It’s the same with

you and these Goddesses.”

“Why are you so afraid?”

“If I wasn’t I’d be dead. And don’t condescend to me. I know you think I’m ridiculous, but if

you were a bit politer you’d hide it.”

“I don’t think you’re ridiculous.”

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I just think you loved your Poppa a little too much. There’s no crime in that. Believe

me, I’ve made the same mistake myself, over and over again. You trust a man, and the next

thing . . .” She sighed, shaking her head. “Never mind. Maybe you're right. Maybe you should

go home. Who knows, perhaps he'll be waiting for you. What do I know?”

They turned their backs on each other without further word, and Jude headed on up the

hill, wishing as she went that she'd found a more tactful way of stating her case.

She'd climbed fifty yards when she heard the soft pad of Hoi-Polloi's step behind her, then

the girl's voice, its rebuking tone gone, saying, “Poppa's not going to come home, is he?”

Jude turned back, meeting Hoi-Polloi's cross-eyed gaze as best she could. “No,” she said, “I

don't think he is.”

Hoi-Polloi looked at the cracked ground beneath her feet. “I think I've always known that,”

she said, “but I just haven't been able to admit it.” Now she looked up again and, contrary to

Jude's expectation, was dry-eyed. Indeed, she almost looked happy, as though she was

lighter for this admission. “We're both alone now, aren't we?” she said.

“Yes, we are.”

“So maybe we should go on together. For both our sakes.”

“Thank you for thinking of me,” Jude said. “ “We women should stick together,” Hoi-Polloi

replied, and came to join Jude as she resumed the climb.

To Gentle's eye Yzordderrex looked like a fever dream of itself. A dark borealis hung above

the palace, but the streets and squares were everywhere visited by

wonders. Rivers sprang

from the fractured pavements and danced up the mountainside,
spitting their climb in

gravity's face. A nimbus of color painted the air over each of the
springing places, bright as a

flock of parrots. It was a spectacle he knew Pie would have reveled in,
and he made a mental

note of every strangeness along the way, so that he could paint the
scene in words when he

was back at the mystic's side.

But it wasn't all wonders. These prisms and waters rose amid scenes of
utter devastation,

where keening widows sat, barely distinguishable from the blackened
rubble of their

houses. Only the Eurhetemec Kesparate, at the gates of which he
presently stood, seemed to

be untouched by the fire raisers. There was no sign of any inhabitant,
however, and Gentle

wandered for several minutes, silently honing a fresh set of insults for
Scopique, when he

caught sight of the man he'd come to find. Athanasius was standing in
front of one of the

trees that lined the boulevards of the Kesparate, staring up at it
admiringly. Though the

foliage was still in place, the arrangement of branches it grew upon
was visible, and Gentle

didn't have to be an aspirant Christos to see how readily a body might
be nailed to them. He

called Athanasius' name several times as he approached, but the man
seemed lost in reverie

and didn't look around, even when Gentle was at his shoulder. He did, however, reply.

"You came not a moment too soon," he said.

"Auto-crucifixion," Gentle replied. "Now that would be a miracle."

Athanasius turned to him. His face was sallow and his forehead bloody. He looked at the

scabs on Gentle's brow and shook his head.

"Two of a kind," he said. Then he raised his hands. The palms bore unmistakable marks.

"Have you got these too?"

"No. And these"—Gentle pointed to his forehead—"aren't what you think. Why do you do

this to yourself?"

"I didn't do it," Athanasius replied. "I woke up with these wounds. Believe me, I don't

welcome them."

Gentle's face registered his skepticism, and Athanasius responded with vim.

"I've never wanted any of this," he said. "Not the stigmata. Not the dreams."

"So why were you looking at the tree?"

"I'm hungry," came the reply, "and I was wondering if I had the strength to climb."

The gaze directed Gentle's attention back to the tree. Amid the foliage on the higher

branches were clusters of comet-ripened fruit, like zebra tangerines.

"I can't help you, I'm afraid," Gentle said. "I don't have enough substance to catch hold of

them. Can't you shake them down?"

"I tried. Never mind. We've got more important business than my belly."

"Finding you bandages, for one," Gentle said, his suspicions chastened out of him by this

misunderstanding, at least for the moment. "I don't want you Weeding to death before we

begin the Reconciliation."

"You mean these?" he said, looking at his hands. "No, it stops and starts whenever it wants.

I'm used to it."

"Well, then, we should at least find you something to eat. Have you tried any of the

houses?"

"I'm not a thief."

"I don't think anybody's coming back, Athanasius. Let's find you some sustenance before

you pass out."

They went to the nearest house, and after a little encouragement from Gentle, who was

surprised to find such moral nicety in his companion, Athanasius kicked open the door. The

house had either been looted or vacated in haste, but the kitchen had been left untouched

and was well stocked. There Athanasius daintily prepared himself a sandwich with his

wounded hands, bloodying the bread as he did so.

"I've such a hunger on me," he said. "I suppose you've been fasting, have you?"

"No. Was I supposed to?"

“Each to their own,” Athanasius replied. “Everybody walks to Heaven by a different road. I

knew a man who couldn't pray unless he had his loins in a zarzi nest.”

Gentle winced. “That's not religion, it's masochism.”

“And masochism isn't a religion?” the other replied. “You surprise me.”

Gentle was startled to find that Athanasius had a capacity for wit, and found himself

warming to the man as they chatted. Perhaps they could profit from each other's company

after all, though any truce would be cosmetic if the subject of the Erasure and all that had

happened there wasn't broached.

“I owe you an explanation,” he said.

“Oh?”

“For what happened at the tents. You lost a lot of your people, and it was because of me.”

“I don't see how you could have handled it much differently,” Athanasius said. “Neither of

us knew the forces we were dealing with.”

“I'm not sure I do now.”

Athanasius made a grim face. “Pie 'oh' pah went to a good deal of trouble to come b ack and

haunt you,” he said.

“It wasn't a haunting.”

“Whatever it was, it took will to do it. The mystif must have known what the consequences

would be, for itself and for my people.”

"It hated to cause harm."

"So what was so important that it caused so much?"

"It wanted to make certain I understood my purpose."

"That's not reason enough," Athanasius said.

"It's the only one I've got," Gentle replied, skirting the other part of Pie's message, the part

about Sartori. Athanasius had no answers to such puzzles, so why vex him with them?

"I believe there's something going on we don't understand," Athanasius said, "Have you

seen the waters?"

"Yes."

"Don't they perturb you? They do me. There are other powers at work here besides us,

Gentle. Maybe we should be seeking them out, taking their advice."

"What do you mean by powers? Other Maestros?"

"No. I mean the Holy Mother. I think she may be here in Yzordderrex."

"But you're not certain."

"Something's moving the waters."

"If She was here, wouldn't you know it? You were one of her high priests."

"I was never that. We worshiped at the Erasure because there was a crime committed

there. A woman was taken from that spot into the First."

Floccus Dado had told Gentle this story as they'd driven across the desert, but with s o

much else to vex and excite him, he'd forgotten the tale: his mother's

of course.

“Her name was Celestine, wasn't it?”

“How do you know?”

“Because I've met her. She's still alive, back in the Fifth.”

The other man narrowed his eyes, as though to sharpen his gaze and prick this if it was a

lie. But after a few moments a tiny smile appeared.

“So you've had dealings with holy women,” he said. “There's hope for you yet.”

“You can meet her yourself, when all this is over.”

“I'd like that.”

“But for now, we have to hold to our course. There can be no deviations. Do you

understand? We can go looking for the Holy Mother when the Reconciliation's done, but not

before.”

“I feel so damn naked,” Athanasius said.

“We all do. It's inevitable; But there's something more inevitable still.”

“What's that?”

“The wholeness of things,” Gentle said. “Things mended. Things healed. That's more certain

than sin, or death, or darkness.”

“Well said,” Athanasius replied. “Who taught you that?”

“You should know. You married me to it.”

“Ah.” He smiled. “Then may I remind you why a man marries? So that he can be made

whole: by a woman.”

“Not this man,” Gentle said.

“Wasn't the mystif a woman to you?”

“Sometimes....”

“And when it wasn't?”

“It was neither man nor woman. It was bliss.”

Athanasius looked intensely discomfited by this. “That sounds profane to me,” he

remarked.

Gentle had never thought of the bond between himself and the mystif in such terms before,

nor did he welcome the burden of such doubts now. Pie had been his teacher, his friend, and

his lover, a selfless champion of the Reconciliation from the very beginning. He could not

believe that his Father would ever have sanctioned such a liaison if it were anything but

holy.

“I think we should let the subject lie,” he told Athanasius, “or we'll be at each other's

throats again, and I for one don't want that.”

“Neither do I,” Athanasius replied. “We'll not discuss it any further. Tell me, where do you

go from here?”

“To the Erasure.”

“And who represents the Synod there?”

“Chicka Jackeen.”

“Ah! So you chose him, did you?”

“You know him?”

“Not well. I know he came to the Erasure long before I did. In fact, I don't think anyone

quite knew how long he'd been there. He's a strange fellow.”

“If that were a disqualification, we'd both be out of a job,” Gentle remarked.

“True enough.”

With that, Gentle offered Athanasius his good wishes, and they parted—civilly if not

fondly—Gentle turning his thoughts from Yzordderrex to the desert beyond. Instantly, the

domestic interior flickered and was replaced seconds later by the vast wall of the Erasure,

rising from a fog in which he dearly hoped the last member of his Synod was awaiting him.

The streams kept converging as the women climbed, until they were walking beside a flow

that would soon be too wide to leap and too furious to ford. There were no embankments to

contain these waters, only the gullies and gutters of the street, but the same intentionality

that drew them up the hill also limited their lateral spread. That way the river didn't

dissipate its energies, but climbed like an animal whose skin was growing at a prodigious

rate to accommodate the power it gained every time it assimilated another of its kind. By

now its destination would not be in doubt. There was only one structure on the city's

highest peak—the Autarch's palace—and unless an abyss opened up in

the street and

swallowed the waters before they reached the gates it would be there
that the trail would

deliver them.

Jude had mixed memories of the palace. Some, like the Pivot Tower
and the chamber of

sluiced prayers beneath it, were terrifying. Others were sweetly erotic,
like the hours she'd

spent dozing in Quaisoir's bed while Concupiscentia sang and the
lover she'd thought too

perfect to be real had covered her with kisses. He was gone, of course,
but she would be

returning into the labyrinth he'd built, now turned to some new
purpose, not only with the

scent of him upon her (you smell of coitus, Celestine had said) but
with the fruit of that

coupling in her womb. Her hope of sharing wisdom with Celestine had
undoubtedly been

blighted by that fact. Even after Tay's disparagement and Clem's
conciliation, the woman

had contrived to treat Jude as a pariah. And if she, merely brushed by
divinity, had sniffed

Sartori on Jude's skin, then surely Tishalulle would sniff the same and
know the child was

there too. If challenged, Jude had decided to tell the truth. She had
reasons for doing all that

she'd done, and she would not make false apologies, but come to the
altars of these

Goddesses with humility and self-respect in equal measure.

The gates were now in view, the river gushing towards them, its flood
a whitewater roar.

Either its assault or some previous violence had thrown both gates off their hinges, and the

water surged through the gap ecstatically.

“How do we get through?” Hoi-Polloi yelled above the din.

“It's not that deep,” Jude said. “We'll be able to wade it if we go together. Here. Take my

hand.”

Without giving the girl time to argue or retreat, she took firm hold of Hoi-Polloi's wrist and

stepped into the river. As she'd said, it wasn't very deep. Its spumy surface only climbed to

the middle of their thighs. But there was considerable force in it, and they were obliged to

proceed with extreme care. Jude couldn't see the ground she was leading them over, the

water was too wild, but she could feel through her soles how the river was digging up the

paving, eroding in a matter of minutes what the tread of soldiers, slaves, and penitents had

not much impressed in two centuries. Nor was this erosion the only threat to their

equilibrium. The river's freight of alms, petitions, and trash was very heavy now, gathered

as it was from five or six places in the lower Kesparates. Slabs of wood knocked at their

hamstrings and shins; swaths of cloth wrapped around their knees. But Jude remained

surefooted and advanced with a steady tread until they were through the gates, glancing

back over her shoulder now and then to reassure Hoi-Polloi with a look or a smile that,

though there was discomfort here, there was no great hazard.

The river didn't slow once it was inside the palace walls. Instead it seemed to find fresh

impetus, its spume thrown ever higher as it climbed through the courtyards. The comet's

beams were falling here in greater abundance than on the Kesparates below, and their light,

striking the water, threw silver filigrees up against the joyless stone. Distracted by the

beauty of this, Jude momentarily lost her footing as they cleared the gates and, despite a cry

of warning, fell back into the river, taking Hoi-Polloi with her. Though they were in no

danger of drowning, the water had sufficient momentum to carry them along, and Hoi -Polloi,

being much the lighter of the two, was swept past Jude at some speed.

Their attempts to stand up again were defeated by the eddies and countercurrents its

enthusiasm was generating, and it was only by chance that Hoi-Pollot—thrown against a

dam of detritus that was choking part of the flow—was able to use its accrued bulk to bring

herself to a halt and haul herself to her knees. The water broke against her with

considerable vehemence as she did so, its will to carry her off undiminished, but she defied

it, and by the time Jude was carried to the place, Hoi—Polloi was getting to her feet.

“Give me your hand!” she yelled, returning the invitation Jude had

first offered when

they'd stepped into the flood.

Jude reached to do so, half turning in the water to stretch for Hoi—
Polloi's fingers. But the

river had other ideas. As their hands came within inches of clasping,
the waters conspired to

spin her and snatch her away, their hold on her so tight the breath
was momentarily

squeezed out of her. She couldn't even yell a word of reassurance but
was hauled off by the

flood, up through a monolithic archway and out of sight.

Violent as the waters were, pitching her around as it raced through
the cloisters and

colonnades, she wasn't in fear of them; quite the opposite. The
exhilaration was contagious.

She was part of their purpose now, even if they didn't know it, and
happy to be delivered to

their summoner, who was surely also their source. Whether that
summoner—be she

Tishalulle or Jokalaylau or any other Goddess who might be resident
here today—judged her

to be a petitioner or simply another piece of trash, only the end of this
ride would tell.

If Yzordderrex had become a place of glorious particulars—every color
singing, every

bubble in its waters crystalline—the Erasure had given itself over to
ambiguity. There was

no breath of wind to stir the heavy mist that hung over the fallen tents
and over the dead,

shrouded but unburied, who lay in their folds; nor did the comet have
fire enough to pierce a

higher fog, the fabric of which left its light dusky and drab. Off to the left of where Gentle's

projection stood, the ring of Madonnas that Athanasius and his disciples had sheltered in

was visible through the murk. But the man he'd come here to find wasn't in residence there,

nor was there any sign of him to the right, though here the fog was so thick it blotted out

everything that lay beyond an eight- or ten-yard range. He nevertheless headed into it, loath

to try calling Chicka Jackeen's name, even if his voice had possessed sufficient strength.

There was a conspiracy of suppression upon the landscape, and he was unwilling to

challenge it. Instead he advanced in silence, his body barely displacing the mist, his feet

making little or no impression on the ground. He felt more like a phantom here than in any

of the other meeting places. It was a landscape for such souls: hushed but haunted.

He didn't have to walk blindly for long. The mist began to thin out after a time, and

through its shreds he caught sight of Chicka Jackeen. He'd dug a chair and small table from

the wreckage and was sitting with his back to the great wall of the First Dominion, playing a

solitary game of cards and talking furiously to himself as he did so. We're all crazies, Gentle

thought, catching him like this. Tick Raw half mad on mustard; Scopique become an amateur

arsonist; Athanasius marking sacramental sandwiches with his pierced hands; and finally

Chicka Jackeen, chattering away to himself like a neurotic monkey. Crazies to a man. And of

all of them he, Gentle, was probably the craziest: the lover of a creature that defied the

definitions of gender, the maker of a man who had destroyed nations. The only sanity in his

life-burning like a clear white light—was that which came from God: the simple purpose of a

Reconciler.

“Jackeen?”

The man looked up from his cards, somewhat guiltily. “Oh. Maestro. You're here.”

“Don't say you weren't expecting me?”

“Not so soon. Is it time for us to go to the Ana?”

“Not yet. I came to be sure you were ready.”

“I am, Maestro. Truly.”

“Were you winning?”

“I was playing myself.”

“That doesn't mean you can't win.”

“No? No. As you say. Then yes, I was winning.” He rose from the table, taking off the

spectacles he'd been wearing to study his cards.

“Has anything come out of the Erasure while you've been waiting?”

“No, not come out. In fact, yours is the first voice I've heard since Athanasius left.”

“He's part of the Synod now,” Gentle said. “Scopique induced him to

join us, to represent

the Second.”

“What happened to the Eurhetemec? Not murdered?”

“He died of old age.”

“Will Athanasius be equal to the task?” Jackeen asked; then, thinking his question

overstepped the bounds of protocol, he said, “I’m sorry. I’ve no right to question your

judgment in this.”

“You’ve every right,” Gentle said. “We’ve got to have complete faith in each other.”

“If you trust Athanasius, then so do I,” Jackeen said simply.

“So we’re ready.”

“There is one thing I’d like to report, if I may.”

“What’s that?”

“I said nothing’s come out of the Erasure, and that’s true—”

“But something went in?”

“Yes. Last night, I was sleeping under the table here”— he pointed to his bed of blankets

and stone—“and I woke chilled to the marrow. I wasn’t sure whether I was dreaming at first,

so I was slow to get up. But when I did I saw these figures coming out of the fog. Dozens of

them.”

“Who were they?”

“Nullianacs,” Jackeen said. “Are you familiar with them?”

“Certainly.”

"I counted fifty at least, just within sight of me."

"Did they threaten you?"

"I don't think they even saw me. They had their eyes on their destination —"

"The First?"

"That's right. But before they crossed over, they shed their clothes, and made some fires,

and burned every last thing they wore or brought with them."

"All of them did this?"

"Every one that I saw. It was extraordinary."

"Can you show me the fires?"

"Easily," Jackeen said, and led Gentle away from the table, talking as he went. "I'd never

seen a Nullianac before, but of course I've heard the stories."

"They're brutes," Gentle said. "I killed one in Vanaeph, a few months ago, and then I met

one of its brothers in Yzordderrex, and it murdered a child I knew."

"They like innocence, I've heard. It's meat and drink to them. And they're all related to

each other, though nobody's ever seen the female of the species. In fact, some say there isn't

one."

"You seem to know a lot about them."

"Well, I read a good deal," Jackeen said, glancing at Gentle. "But you know what they say:

Study nothing except in the knowledge—"

"—that you already knew it."

“That's right.”

Gentle looked at the man with fresh interest, hearing the old saw from his lips. Was it so

commonplace a dictum that every student had it by heart, or did Chicka Jackeen know the

significance of what he was saying? Gentle stopped walking, and Jackeen stopped beside

him, offering a smile that verged on the mischievous. Now it was Gentle who did the

studying, his text the other man's face: and, reading, saw the dictum proved.

“My God,” he said. “Lucius?”

“Yes, Maestro. It's me.”

“Lucius! Lucius!”

The years had taken their toll, of course, though not insufferably. While the face in front of

him was no longer that of the eager acolyte he had sent from Gamut Street, it was not

marked by more than a tenth of the two centuries in between.

“This is extraordinary,” Gentle said,

“I thought maybe you knew who I was, and you were playing a game with me.”

“How could I know?”

“Am I really so different?” the other said, clearly a little deflated. “It took me twenty -three

years to master the feat of holding, but I thought I'd caught the last of my youth before it

went entirely. A little vanity. Forgive me.”

“When did you come here?”

“It seems like a lifetime, so it probably is. I wandered back and forth through the

Dominions first, studying with one evocator after another, but I was never content with any

of them. I had you to judge them by, you see. So I was always dissatisfied.”

“I was a lousy teacher,” Gentle said.

“Not at all. You taught me the fundamentals, and I've lived by them and prospered. Maybe

not in the world's eyes, but in mine.”

“The only lesson I gave you was on the stairs. Remember, that last night?”

“Of course I remember. The laws of study, workings, and fear. Wonderful.”

“But they weren't mine, Lucius. The mystif taught them to me. I just passed them along.”

“Isn't that what most teachers do?”

“I think the great ones refine wisdom, they don't simply repeat it. I refined nothing. I

thought every word I uttered was perfect, because it was falling from my lips.”

“So my idol has feet of clay?”

“I'm afraid so.”

“You think I didn't know that? I saw what happened at the Retreat. I saw you fail, and it's

because of that I've waited here.”

“I don't follow.”

“I knew you wouldn't accept failure. You'd wait, and you'd plan, and someday, even if it

took a thousand years, you'd come back to try again."

"One of these days I'll tell you how it really happened, and you won't be so impressed."

"However it went, you're here," Lucius said. "And I have my dream at last."

"Which is what?"

"To work with you. To join you in the Ana, Maestro to Maestro." He grinned. "God is in His

Heaven today," he said. "If I'm ever happier than this, it'll kill me. Ah! There, Maestro!" He

stopped and pointed to the ground a few yards from them. "That's one of the Nullianacs'

fires."

The place was blasted, but there were some remains of the Nullianacs' robes among the

ashes. Gentle approached.

"I don't have the wherewithal to sort through them, Lucius. Will you do it for me?"

Lucius obliged, stooping to turn over the cinders and pluck out what remained of the

clothes. There were fragments of suits, robes, and coats in a variety of styles, one fin ely

embroidered, after the fashion of Patashoqua, another barely more than sackcloth, a third

with medals attached, as if its owner had been a soldier.

"They must have come from all over the Imajica," Gentle said.

"Summoned," Lucius replied.

"That seems like a reasonable assumption."

“But why?”

Gentle mused a moment. “I think the Unbeheld has taken them into His furnace, Lucius.

He's burned them away.”

“So He's wiping the Dominions clean?”

“Yes, He is. And the Nullianacs knew it. They threw off their clothes like penitents, because

they knew that they were going to their judgment.”

“You see,” Lucius said, “you are wise.”

“When I'm gone, will you burn even these last pieces?”

“Of course.”

“It's His will that we cleanse this place.”

“I'll start right away.”

“And I'll go back to the Fifth and finish my preparations.”

“Is the Retreat still standing?”

“Yes. But that's not where I'll be. I've returned to Gamut Street.”

“That was a fine house.”

“It's still fine in its way. I saw you there on the stairs only a few nights ago.”

“A spirit there and flesh here? What could be more perfect?”

“Being flesh and spirit in the whole of Creation,” Gentle said.

“Yes, That would be finer still.” “And it'll happen. It's all One, Lucius.”
“I hadn't forgotten

that lesson.” “Good.”

“But if I may ask—”

“Yes?”

“Would you call me Chicka Jackeen from now on? I've lost the bloom of youth, so I may as

well lose the name.”

“Maestro Jackeen it is.” “Thank you.”

“I'll see you in a few hours,” Gentle said, and with that put his thoughts to his return.

This time there were no diversions or loiterings, for sentiment's sake or any other. He

went at the speed of his intention back through Yzordderrex and along the Lenten Way, over

the Cradle and the benighted heights of the Jokalaylau, passing across the Mount of Upper

Bayak and Patashoqua (within whose gates he had yet to step), finally returning into the

Fifth, to the room he'd left in Gamut Street.

Day was at the window and Clem was at the door, patiently awaiting the return of his

Maestro. As soon as he saw a flicker of animation in Gentle's face he began to speak, his

message too urgent to be delayed a second longer than it had to be.

“Monday's back,” he said.

Gentle stretched and yawned. His nape and lumbar regions ached, and his bladder was

ready to burst, but at least he hadn't returned to discover his bowels had given out, as Tick

Raw had predicted.

“Good,” he said. He got to his feet and hobbled to the mantelpiece, clinging to it as he

kicked some life back into his deadened legs. “Did he get all the stones?”

“Yes, he did. But I'm afraid Jude didn't come back with him.”

“Where the hell is she?”

“He won't tell me. He's got a message from her, he says, but he won't trust it to anyone but

you. Do you want to speak to him? He's downstairs, eating breakfast.”

“Yes, send him up, will you? And if you can, find me something to eat. Anything but

sausages.”

Gem headed off down the stairs, leaving Gentle to cross to the window and throw it open.

The last morning that the Fifth would see Unreconciled had dawned, and the temperature

was already high enough to wilt the leaves on the tree outside. Hearing Monday's feet

clattering up the stairs, Gentle turned to greet the messenger, who appeared with a half -

eaten hamburger in one hand and a half-smoked cigarette in the other.

“You've got something to tell me?” he said.

“Yes, boss. From Jude.”

“Where did she go?”

“Yzordderrex. That's part of what I'm supposed to tell you. She's gone to Yzordderrex.”

“Did you see her go?”

“Not exactly. She made me stand outside while she went, so that's what I did.”

“And the rest of the message?”

“She told me”—he made a great show of concentration now—“to tell

you where she'd gone,

and I've done that; then she said to tell you that the Reconciliation isn't safe, and that you

weren't to do nothing until she contacted you again."

"Isn't safe? Those were her words?"

"That's what she said. No kiddinV

"Do you know what she was talking about?"

"Search me, boss." His eyes had gone from Gentle to the darkest corner of the room. "I

didn't know you had a monkey," he said. "Did you bring it back with you?"

Gentle looked to the corner. Little Ease was there, staring up at the Maestro fretfully,

having presumably crept down into the Meditation Room sometime during the night.

"Does it eat hamburgers?" Monday said, going down on his haunches.

"You can try," Gentle said distractedly. "Monday, is that all Jude said: It isn't safe?" "That's

it, boss. I swear."

"She just arrived at the Retreat and told you she wasn't coming back?"

"Oh, no, she took her time," Monday said, pulling a face as the creature he'd taken to be an

ape skulked from its corner and started towards the proffered hamburger.

He made to stand up, but it bared its teeth in a grin of such ferocity he thought better of

doing so and simply extended his arm as far as he could to keep the beast from his face.

Little Ease slowed as it came within sniffing distance and, instead of

snatching the meal,

claimed it from Monday's hand with the greatest delicacy, pinkies raised. "Will you finish the

story?" Gentle said. "Oh, yeah. Well, there was this fella in the Retreat when we got there,

and she had a long jaw with him." "This was somebody she knew?" "Oh, yeah." "Who?"

"I forget his name," Monday said, but seeing Gentle's brow frown protested, "That wasn't

part of the message, boss. If it had been I'd have remembered."

"Remember anyway," Gentle said, beginning to suspect conspiracy. "Who was he?"

Monday stood up and drew nervously on his cigarette. "I don't recall. There were all these

birds, you know, and bees an' stuff. I wasn't really listening. It was something short, like

Cody or Coward or—" "Dowd,"

"Yeah! That's it. It was Dowd. And he was really fucked up, let me tell you."

"But alive."

"Oh, yeah, for a while. Like I said, they talked together."

"And it was after this that she said she was going to Yzordderrex?"

"That's right. She told me to bring the stones back to you, and the message with 'em."

"Both of which you've done. Thank you."

"You're the boss, boss," Monday said. "Is that all? If you want me I'm on the step. It's going

to be a scorcher."

He thundered off downstairs.

“Shall I leave the door open, Liberatore?” Little Ease said, as it nibbled on the hamburger.

“What are you doing here?”

“I got lonely up there,” the creature said.

“You promised obedience,” Gentle reminded it.

“You don't trust her, do you?” Little Ease replied. “You think she's gone off to join Sartori.”

He hadn't until now. But the notion, now that it was floated, didn't seem so improbable.

Jude had confessed what she felt for Sartori, in this very house, and clearly believed that he

loved her in return. Perhaps she'd simply slipped away from the Retreat while Monday's

back was turned and had gone to find the father of her child. If that was the case, it was

paradoxical behavior, to seek out the arms of a man whose enemy she'd just helped towards

victory. But this was not a day to waste analyzing such conundrums. She'd done what she'd

done, and there was an end to it.

Gentle hoisted himself up onto the sill, from which perch he'd often planned his itinerary,

and attempted to push all thoughts of her defection out of his head. This was a bad room in

which to try and forget her, however. It was, after all, the womb in which she'd been made.

The boards most likely still concealed motes of the sand that had marked her circle and

stains, deep in their grain, of the liquors he'd anointed her nakedness

with. Try as he might

to keep the thoughts from coming, one led inevitably to another.
Imagining her naked, he

pictured his hands upon her, slick with oils. Then his kisses. Then his
body. And before a

minute had passed he was sitting on the sill with an erection nuzzling
against his

underwear.

Of all the mornings to be plagued with such distraction! The
beguilements of the flesh had

no place in the work ahead of him. They'd brought the last
Reconciliation to tragedy, and he

would not allow them to lead him from his sanctified path by a single
step. He looked down

at his groin, disgusted with himself.

"Cut it off," Little Ease advised.

If he could have done the deed without making an invalid of himself,
he'd have done so

there and then, and gladly. He had nothing but contempt for what
rose between his legs. It

was a hotheaded idiot, and he wanted rid of it.

"I can control it," he replied.

"Famous last words," the creature said.

A blackbird had come into the tree and was singing blithely there. He
looked its way and

beyond, up through the branches into the burnished blue sky. His
thoughts abstracted as he

studied it, and by the time he heard Clem coming up the stairs with
food and drink the

spasm of carnality had passed, and he greeted his angels with a cooling brow.

“So now we wait,” he told Clem.

“What for?”

“For Jude to come back.”

“And if she doesn't?”

“She will,” Gentle replied. “This is where she was born. It's her home, even if she wishes it

weren't. She'll have to make her way back here eventually. And if she's conspired against us,

Clem—if she's working with the enemy—then I swear I'll draw a circle right here”—he

pointed to the boards—“and Til unmake her so well it'll be as though she never drew

breath.”

The law-defying waters were compassionate. Though they carried Jude through the palace

at considerable speed, roaming through corridors their passage had already stripped of

tapestries and furnishings, they treated their cargo with care. She wasn't thrown against the

walls or the pillars, but was borne up on a ship of surf that neither faltered nor foundered

but hurried, remotely helmed, to its destination. That place could scarcely be in doubt. The

mystery at the heart of the Autarch's maze had always been the Pivot Tower, and though

she'd witnessed the beginning of the tower's undoing, it was still, surely, her place of

debarkation. Prayers and petitions had gone there for an age, attracted by the Pivot's

authority. Whatever force had replaced it, calling these waters, it had set its throne on the

rubble of the fallen lord.

And now she had proof of that, as the waters carried her out of the naked corridors and

into the still severer environs of the tower, slowing to deliver her into a pool so thick with

detritus it was almost solid. Out of this wreckage rose a staircase, and she hauled herself

from the debris and lay on the lower steps, giddy but exhilarated. The waters continued to

surge around the staircase like an eager spring tide, and their clear desire to be up the flight

was contagious. She got to her feet, after a little time, and proceeded to climb.

Although there were no lights burning at the top, there was plenty of illumination spilling

down the stairs to meet her, and like the light at the springing places it was prismatic,

suggesting there were more waters ahead that had come into the palace via other routes.

Before she was even halfway up the flight, two women appeared and stared down at her.

Both were dressed in simple off—white shifts, the fatter of the pair, a woman of gargantuan

proportions, unbuttoned to bare her breasts to the baby she was nursing. She looked almost

as infantile as her charge, her hair wispy, her face, like her breasts, heavy and sugar—

almond pink. The woman beside her was older and slimmer, her skin substantially darker

than that of her companion, her gray hair braided and combed out to her shoulders like a

cowl. She wore gloves, and glasses, and regarded Jude with almost professorial detachment.

“Another soul saved from the flood,” she said.

Jude had stopped climbing. Though neither woman had made any sign that she was

forbidden entry, she wanted to come into this miraculous place as a guest, not a trespasser.

“Am I welcome?”

“Of course,” said the mother. “Have you come to meet the

Goddesses?”

“Yes.”

“Are you from the Bastion, then?”

Before Jude could reply, her companion supplied the answer. “Of course not! Look at her!”

“But the waters brought her.”

“The waters’ll bring any woman who dares. They brought us, didn’t they?”

“Are there many others?” Jude asked.

“Hundreds,” came the reply. “Maybe thousands by now.”

Jude wasn’t surprised. If someone like herself, a stranger in the Dominions, had come to

suspect that the Goddesses were still extant, how much more hopeful must the women who

lived here have been, living with the legends of Tishalulle and Jokalaylau.

When Jude reached the top of the stairs, the bespectacled woman introduced herself.

“I’m Lotti Yap.”

“I’m Judith.”

“We’re pleased to see you, Judith,” the other woman said. “I’m Paramarola. And this

fellow”—she looked down at the baby—“is Billo.”

“Yours?” Jude asked.

“Now where would I have found a man to give me the likes of this?” Paramarola said.

“We’ve been in the Annex for nine years,” Lotti Yap explained. “Guests of the Autarch.”

“May his thorn rot and his berries wither,” Paramarola added.

“And where have you come from?” Lotti asked.

“The Fifth,” Jude said.

She was not fully attending to the women now, however. Her interest had been claimed by

a window that lay across the puddle—strewn corridor behind them: or, rather, by the vista

visible through it. She went to the sill, both awed and astonished, and gazed out at an

extraordinary spectacle. The flood had cleared a circle half a mile wide or more in the center

of the palace, sweeping walls and pillars and roofs away and drowning the rubble. All that

was left, rising from the waters, were islands of rock where the taller towers had stood, and

here and there a corner of one of the palace's vast amphitheaters, preserved as if to mock

the overweening pretensions of its architect. Even these fragments would not stand for

much longer, she suspected. The waters circled this immense basin without violence, but

their sheer weight would soon bring these last remnants of Sartori's masterwork down.

At the center of this small sea was an island larger than the rest, its lower shores made up

of the half-demolished chambers that had clustered around the Pivot Tower, its rocks the

rubble of that tower's upper half, mingled with vast pieces of its tenant, and its height the

remains of the tower itself, a ragged but glittering pyramid of rubble in which a white fire

seemed to be burning. Looking at the transformation these waters had wrought, eroding in a

matter of days, perhaps hours, what the Autarch had taken decades to devise and build, Jude

wondered that she'd reached this place intact. The power she'd first encountered on the

lower slopes as an innocent, if willful, brook was here revealed as an awesome force for

change.

"Were you here when this happened?" she asked Lotti Yap.

"We saw only the end of it," she replied. "But it was quite a sight, let me tell you. Seeing the

towers fall—"

"We were afraid for our lives," Paramarola said.

"Speak for yourself," Lotti replied. "The waters didn't set us free just to drown us. We were

prisoners in the Annex, you see. Then the floor cracked open, and the waters just bubbled up

and washed the walls away."

"We knew the Goddesses would come, didn't we?" Paramarola said.

"We always had faith

in that."

"So you never believed they were dead?"

"Of course not. Buried alive, maybe. Sleeping. Even lunatic. But never dead."

"What she says is right," Lotti observed. "We knew this day would come."

“Unfortunately, it may be a short victory,” Jude said.

“Why do you say that?” Lotti replied. “The Autarch's gone.”

“Yes, but his Father hasn't.”

“His Father?” said Paramarola. “I thought he was a bastard.”

“Who's his father then?” said Lotti.

“Hapexamendios.”

Paramarola laughed at this, but Lotti Yap nudged in her well-padded ribs.

“It's not a joke, Rola.”

“It has to be,” the other protested.

“Do you see the woman laughing?” Then, to Jude: “Do you have any evidence for this?”

“No, I don't.”

“Then where'd you get such an idea?”

Jude had guessed it would be difficult to persuade people of Sartori's origins, but she'd

optimistically supposed that when the moment came she'd be possessed by a sudden

lucidity. Instead she felt a rage of frustration. If she was obliged to unravel the whole sorry

history of her involvement with the Autarch Sartori to every soul who stood between her

and the Goddesses, the worst would be upon them all before she was halfway there. Then,

inspiration.

“The Pivot's the proof,” she said.

“How so?” said Lotti, who was now studying this woman the flood had brought to their feet

with fresh intensity.

“He could never have moved the Pivot without his Father's collaboration.”

“But the Pivot doesn't belong to the Unbeheld,” Paramorola said. “It never did.”

Jude looked confounded.

“What Rola says is true,” Lotti told her. “He may have used it to control a few weak men.

But the Pivot was never His.”

“Whose then?”

“Uma Umagammagi was in it.”

“And who's that?”

“The sister of Tishalulle” and Jokalaylau. Half-sister of the daughters of the Delta.”

“There was a Goddess in the Pivot?”

“Yes.”

“And the Autarch didn't know it?”

“That's right. She hid Herself there to escape Hapexamendios when He passed through the

Imajica. Jokalaylau went into the snow and was lost there. Tishalulle
—”

”—in the Cradle of Chzercemit,” Jude said.

“Yes indeed,” said Lotti, plainly impressed.

“And Uma Umagammagi hid Herself in solid rock,” Paramarola went on, telling the tale as

though to a child, “thinking He'd pass over the place not seeing Her. But He chose the Pivot

as the center of the Imajica and laid His power upon it, sealing Her in.”

This was surely the ultimate irony, Jude thought. The architect of Yzordderrex had built his

fortress, indeed his entire empire, around an imprisoned Goddess. Nor was the parallel with

Celestine lost on her. It seemed Roxborough had been unwittingly working in a grim

tradition when he'd sealed Celestine up beneath his house.

“Where are the Goddesses now?” Jude asked Lotti.

“On the island. We'll all be allowed into their presence in time, and we'll be blessed by

them. But it'll take days.”

“I don't have days,” Jude said. “How do I get to the island?”

“You'll be called when your time comes.”

“That has to be now,” Jude said, “or it'll be never.” She looked left and right along the

passageway. “Thank you for the education,” she said. “Maybe I'll see you again.”

Choosing right over left she made to leave, but Lotti took hold of her sleeve.

“You don't understand, Judith,” she said. “The Goddesses have come to make us safe.

Nothing can harm us here. Not even the Unbeheld.” “I hope that's true,” Jude said. “To the

bottom of my heart, I hope that's true. But I have to warn them, in case it isn't.”

“Then we'd better come with you,” Lotti said, “You'll never find your way otherwise.”

“Wait,” Paramarola said. “Should we be doing this? She may be

dangerous.”

“Aren't we all?” Lotti replied. “That's why they locked us away in the first place,
remember?”

If the atmosphere of the streets outside the palace had suggested some post—apocalyptic

carnival—the waters dancing, the children laughing, the air pavonine—then that sense was

a hundred times stronger in the passageways around the rim of the flood-scoured basin.

There were children here too, their laughter more musical than ever. None was over five or

so, but there were both boys and girls in the throng. They turned the corridors into

playgrounds, their din echoing off walls that had not heard such joy since they'd been raised.

There was also water, of course. Every inch of ground was blessed by a puddle, a rivulet, or a

stream, every arch had a liquid curtain cascading from its keystone, every chamber was

refreshed by burbling springs and roof-grazing fountains. And in every tinkling trickle there

was the same sentience that Jude had felt in the tide that had brought her up here: water as

life, filled to the last drop with the purpose of the Goddesses. Overhead, the comet was at its

height and sent its straight white beams through any chink it could find, turning the

humblest puddle into an oracular pool and plaiting its light into the gush of every spout.

The women in these glittering corridors came in all shapes and sizes.

Many, Lotti

explained, were like themselves, former prisoners of the Bastion or its dreaded Annex;

others had simply found their way up the hill following their instincts and the streams,

leaving their husbands, dead or alive, below.

“Are there no men here at all?”

“Only the little ones,” said Lotti.

“They’re all little ones,” Paramarola observed.

“There was a captain at the Annex who was a brute,” Lotti said, “and when the waters came

he must have been emptying his bladder, because his body floated by our cell with his

trousers unbuttoned.”

“And you know, he was still holding on to his manhood,” Paramarola said. “He had the

choice between that and swimming—”

“—and instead of letting go, he drowned,” Lotti said.

This entertained Paramarola no end, and she laughed so hard the baby’s mouth was

dislodged from her teat. Milk spurted in the child’s face, which brought a further round of

merriment. Jude didn’t ask how Paramarola came to be so nourishing when she was neither

the mother of the child nor, presumably, pregnant. It was just one of the many enigmas this

journey showed her: like the pool that clung to one of the walls, filled to brimming with

luminous fish; or the waters that imitated fire, from which some of the women had made

crowns; or the immensely long eel she saw carried past, its gaping head on a child's

shoulder, its body looped between half a dozen women, back and forth across their

shoulders ten times or more. If she'd requested an explanation for any one of these sights

she'd have been obliged to inquire about them all, and they'd never have got more than a

few yards down the corridor.

The journey brought them, at last, to a place where the waters had carved out a shallow

pool at the edge of the main basin, served by several rivulets that climbed through rubble to

fill it to brimming, its overflow running into the basin itself. In it and around it were perhaps

thirty women and children, some playing, some talking, but most, their clothes shed, waiting

silently in the pool, gazing out across the turbulent waters of the basin to Uma

Umagammagi's island. Even as Jude and her guides approached the place, a wave broke

against the lip of the pool and two women, standing there hand in hand, went with it as it

withdrew and were carried away towards the island. There was an eroticism about the

scene which in other circumstances Jude would certainly have denied she felt. But here, such

priggishness seemed redundant, even ludicrous. She allowed her imagination to wonder

what it would be like to sink into the midst of this nakedness, where the only scrap of

masculinity was between the legs of a suckling infant; to brush breast to breast, and let her

fingers be kissed and her neck be caressed, and kiss and caress in her turn.

“The water in the basin's very deep,” Lotti said at her side. “It goes all the way down into

the mountain.”

What had happened to the dead, Jude wondered, whose company Dowd had found so

educative? Had the waters sluiced them away, along with the invocations and entreaties that

had dropped into that same darkness from beneath the Pivot Tower? Or had they been

dissolved into a single soup, the sex of dead men forgiven, the pain of dead women healed,

and—all mingled with the prayers—become part of this indefatigable flood? She hoped so. If

the powers here were to have authority against the Unbeheld, they would have to re claim

every forsaken strength they could. The walls between Kesparates had already been dragged

down, and the plashing streams were making a continuum of city and palace. But the past

had to be reclaimed as well, and whatever miracles it had boasted—surely there'd been

some, even here—preserved. This was more than an abstract desire on Jude's part. She was,

after all, one of those miracles, made in the image of the woman who'd ruled here with as

much ferocity as her husband.

"Is this the only way of getting to the island?" she asked Lotti.

"There aren't ferries, if that's what you mean."

"I'd better start swimming, then," Jude said.

Her clothes were an encumbrance, but she wasn't yet so easy with herself that she could

strip off on the rocks and go into the waters naked, so with a brief thanks to Lotti and

Paramarola she started to climb down the tumble of blocks that surrounded the pool.

"I hope you're wrong, Judith," Lotti called after her.

"So do I," Jude replied. "Believe me, so do I."

Both this exchange and her ungainly descent drew the puzzled gaze of several of the

bathers, but none made any objection to her appearing in their midst. The closer she got to

the waters of the basin, the more anxious she became about the crossing, however. It was

several years since she'd swum any distance, and she doubted she'd have the strength to

resist the currents and eddies if they chose to keep her from her destination. But they

wouldn't drown her, surely. They'd borne her all the way up here, after all, sweeping her

through the palace unharmed. The only difference between this journey and that (though it

was a profound one, to be sure) was the depth of the water.

Another wave was approaching the lip of the pool, and there was a woman and child

floating forward to take it. Before they could do so, she took a running jump off the boulder

she was perched on, clearing the heads of the bathers below by a hair's breadth and

plunging into the tide. It wasn't so much a dive as a plummet, and it took her deep. She

flailed wildly to right herself, opening her eyes but unable to decide which way was up. The

waters knew. They lifted her out of their depths like a cork and threw her up into the spume.

She was already twenty yards or more from the rocks and being carried away at speed. She

had time to glimpse Lotti searching for her in the surf, then the eddies turned her around,

and around again, until she no longer knew the direction in which the pool lay. Instead, she

fixed her eyes on the island and began to swim as best she could towards it. The waters

seemed content to supplement her efforts with energies of their own, though they were

describing a spiral around the island, and as they carried her closer to its shore they also

swept her in a counterclockwise motion around it.

The comet's light fell on the waves all around her, and its glitter kept the depths from

sight, which she was glad of. Buoyed up though she was, she didn't want to be reminded of

the pit beneath her. She put all her will into the business of swimming, not even allowing

herself to enjoy the roiling of the waters against her body. Such

luxury, like the questions

she'd wanted to ask as she'd walked with Lotti and Paramarola, was for another day.

The shore was within fifty yards of her now, but her strokes became increasingly

irrelevant the closer to the island she came. As the spiral tightened, the tide became more

authoritative, and she finally gave up any attempt at self-propulsion and surrendered herself

utterly to the hold of the waters. They carried her around the island twice before she felt her

feet scraping the steeply inclined rocks beneath the surge, presenting her with a fine, if

giddy, view of Uma Umagammagi's temple. Not surprisingly, the waters had been more

inspired here than in any other spot she'd seen. They'd worked at the blocks of which the

tower was built, monumental though they were, eroding the mortar between them, then

eating at them top and bottom, replacing their severity with a mathematics of undulation.

Slabs of stone the height of the masons who'd first carved them were no longer locked

together but balanced like acrobats, one corner laid against another, while radiant water ran

through the cavities and carried on its work of turning the once-impregnable tower into a

wedded column of water, stone, and light. The eroded moles had run off in the rivulets and

been deposited on the shore as a fine, soft sand, in which Jude lay when she emerged from

the basin, given a giggling welcome by a quartet of children playing nearby.

She allowed herself only a minute to catch her breath; then she got to her feet and started

up the beach towards the temple. Its doorway was as elaborately eroded as the blocks, a veil

of bright water concealing the interior from those waiting nearby. There were perhaps a

dozen women at the threshold. One, a girl barely past pubescence, was walking on her

hands; somebody else seemed to be singing, but the music was so close to the sound of

running water that Jude couldn't decide whether a voice was flowing or some stream was

aspiring to melody. As at the pool, nobody objected to her sudden appearance, nor remarked

on the fact that she was weighed down by waterlogged clothes while they were in various

states of undress. A benign languor was on them all, and had it not been for Jude's willpower

she might have let it claim her too. She didn't hesitate, however, but stepped through the

water door without so much as a murmur to those waiting at the threshold.

Inside, there was no solid sight to greet her. Instead, the air was filled with forms of light,

folding and unfolding as though invisible hands were performing a lucid origami. They

weren't working towards petty resemblance, but transforming their radiant stuff over and

over, each new shape on its way to becoming another before it was fixed. She looked down

at her arms. They were still visible, but not as flesh and blood. They'd learned the trick of

the light already and were blossoming into a multiplicity of forms in order to join the play.

She reached out to touch one of her fellow visitors with her burgeoning fingers and,

brushing her, caught a glimpse of the woman from whom this origami had emerged. She

appeared the way a body might if a damp sheet billowed against it, momentarily clinging to

the shape of her hip, her cheek, her breast, then billowing again and snatching the glimpse

away. But there'd been a smile there, she was certain of that.

Reassured that she was neither alone nor unwelcome here, she began to advance into the

temple. The promise of eroticism she'd first felt as she gazed into the pool was now realized.

She felt the forms of her own body spreading like milk dropped into the fluid air and grazing

the bodies of those she was passing between. Musings, most no more than half formed,

mingled with the sensation. Perhaps she would dissolve here and flow out through the walls

to join the waters around the islands; or perhaps she was already in that sea, and the flesh

and blood she thought she'd owned was just a figment of those waters, conjured to comfort

the lonely land. Or perhaps... or perhaps... or perhaps. These speculations were not divorced

from the brushing of form against form but were part of the pleasure,

her nerves bearing

these fruits, which in turn made her more tender to the touches of her companions .

They were falling away as she advanced, she realized. Her progress was taking her up into

the heights of the temple. If there had been solid ground beneath her feet, she'd lost all

sense of it as she crossed the threshold and rose without effort, her stuff possessed of the

same law-defying genius as had been the waters below. There was another motion ahead

and above her, more sinuous than the forms she'd met at the door, and she rose towards it

as if summoned, praying that when the moment came she'd have the words and lips to shape

the thoughts in her head. The motion was getting clearer and if she'd had any doubt below

as to whether these sights were imagined or seen, she now had such dichotomies swept

away.

She was both seeing with her imagination and imagining she saw the glyph that hung in

the air in front of her: a Mobius strip of light-haunted water, a steady rhythm passing

through its seamless loop and throwing off waves of brilliant color, which shed bright rains

around her. Here was the raiser of springs; here was the summoner of rivers; here was the

sublime presence whose strength had brought the palace to rubble and made a home for

oceans and children where there'd only been terror before. Here was

Uma Umagammagi.

Though she studied the Goddess's glyph, Jude could see no hint of anything that breathed,

sweated, or corrupted in it. But there was such an emanation of tenderness from the form

that, faceless as the Goddess was, it seemed to Jude she could feel Her smile, Her kiss, Her

loving gaze. And love it was. Though this power knew her not at all, Jude felt embraced and

comforted as only love could embrace and comfort. There'd never been a time in her life,

until now, when some part of her had not been afraid. It was the condition of being alive th at

even bliss was attended by the imminence of its decease. But here such terrors seemed

absurd. This face loved her unconditionally and would do so forever.

"Sweet Judith," she heard the Goddess say, the voice so charged, so resonant, that these

few syllables were an aria. "Sweet Judith, what's so urgent that you risk your life to come

here?"

As Uma Umagammagi spoke, Jude saw her own face appearing in the ripples, brightening,

then teased out into a thread of light that was run into the Goddess's glyph. Sh e's reading

me, Jude thought. She's trying to understand why I'm here, and when She does She'll take

the responsibility away. I'll be able to stay in this glorious place with Her, always.

"So," said the Goddess after a time. "This is a grim business. It falls to you to choose

between stopping this Reconciliation or letting it go on and risking some harm from

Hapexamendios—”

“Yes,” Jude replied, grateful that she'd been relieved of the need to explain herself. “I don't

know what the Unbeheld is planning. Maybe nothing ...”

“... and maybe the end of the Imajica.”

“Could He do that?”

“Very possibly,” said Uma Umagammagi. “He's done harm to Our temples and Our sisters

many, many times, both in His own person and through His agents. He's a soul in error, and

lethal.”

“But would He destroy a whole Dominion?”

“I can no more predict Him than you can,” Umagammagi said. “But I'll mourn if the chance

to complete the circle is missed.”

“The circle?” said Jude. “What circle?”

“The circle of the Imajica,” the Goddess replied. “Please understand, sister, the Dominions

were never meant to be divided this way. That was the work of the first human spirits, when

they came into their terrestrial life. Nor was there any harm in it, at the beginning. It was

their way of learning to live in a condition that intimidated them. When they looked up, they

saw stars. When they looked down, they saw Earth. They couldn't make their mark on what

was above, but what was below could be divided and owned and fought over. From that

division, all others sprang. They lost themselves to territories and nations, all shaped by the

other sex, of course; all named by them. They even buried themselves in the Earth to have it

more utterly, preferring worms to the company of light. They were blinded to the Imajica,

and the circle was broken, and Hapexamendios, who was made by the will of these men,

grew strong enough to forsake His makers and so passed from the Fifth Dominion into the

First—”

”—murdering Goddesses as He went.”

“He did harm, yes, but He could have done greater harm still if He'd known the shape of the

Imajica. He could have discovered what mystery it circled and gone there instead.”

“What mystery's that?”

“You're going back into a dangerous place, sweet Judith, and the less you know the safer

you'll be. When the time comes, we will unravel these mysteries together, as sisters. Until

then take comfort that the error of tire Son is also the error of the Father, and in time all

errors must undo themselves and pass away.”

“So if they'll solve themselves,” Jude said, “why do I have to go back to the Fifth?”

Before Uma Umagammagi could resume speaking, another voice intruded. Particles rose

between Jude and the Goddess as this other woman spoke, pricking Jude's flesh where they

touched, reminding her of a state that knew ice and fire.

“Why do you trust this woman?” the stranger said.

“Because she came to us openhearted, Jokalaylau,” the Goddess replied.

“How openhearted is a woman who treads dry-eyed in the place where her sister died?”

Jokalaylau said. “How openhearted is a woman who comes into Our presence without shame,

when she has the Autarch Sartori's child in her womb?”

“We have no place for shame here,” Umagammagi said.

“You may have no place,” Jokalaylau said, rising into view now. “I have plenty.”

Like her sister, Jokalaylau was here in Her essential form: a more complex shape than that

of Uma Umagammagi, and less pleasing to the eye, because the motions that ran in it were

more hectic, Her form not so much rippling as boiling, shedding its pricking darts as it did

so.

“Shame is wholly appropriate for a woman who has lain with one of Our enemies,” she

said.

Despite the intimidation Jude felt from the Goddess, she spoke out in her own defense.

“It's not as simple as that,” she said, her courage fueled by the frustration she felt, having

this intruder spoil the congress between herself and Uma Umagammagi. “I didn't know he

was the Autarch.”

“Who did you imagine he was? Or didn't you care?”

The exchange might have escalated, but that Uma Umagammagi spoke again, her tone as

serene as ever.

“Sweet Judith,” she said, “let me speak with my sister. She's suffered at the hands of the

Unbeheld more than either Tishalulle” or myself, and She'll not readily forgive any flesh

touched by Him or His children. Please understand Her pain, as I hope to make Her

understand yours.”

She spoke with such delicacy that Jude now felt the shame Jokalaylau had accused her of

lacking: not for the child, but for her rage.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “That was ... inappropriate.”

“If you'll wait on the shore,” said Uma Umagammagi, “we'll speak together again in a little

while.”

From the moment that the Goddess had talked of Jude's returning to the Fifth, she'd known

this parting would come. But she hadn't prepared herself to leave the Goddess's embrace so

soon, and now that she felt gravity claiming her again, it was an agony. There was no help

for it, however. If Uma Umagammagi knew what she suffered- and how could She not? — She

did nothing to ameliorate the hurt, but folded Her glyph back into the matrix, leaving Jude to

fall like a petal from a blossom tree, lightly enough, but with a sense of separation worse

than any bruising. The forms of the women she'd passed through were still unfolding and

folding below, as exquisite as ever, and the water music at the door was as soothing, but

they could not salve the loss. The melody that had sounded so joyous when she'd entered

was now elegaic, like a hymn for harvest home, thankful for the gifts bestowed but touched

by fears for a colder season to come.

It was waiting on the other side of the curtain, that season. Though the children still

laughed on the shore, and the basin was still a glorious spectacle of light and motion, she

had gone from the presence of a loving spirit and couldn't help but mourn. Her tears

astonished the women at the threshold, and several rose to console her, but she shook her

head as they approached, and they quietly parted to let her go her way alone, down to the

water. There she sat, not daring to glance back at the temple where her fate was being

decided, but gazing out over the basin.

What now? she wondered. If she was called back into the presence of the Goddesses to be

told she wasn't fit to make any decision concerning the Reconciliation, she'd be quite happy

with the judgment. She'd leave the problem in surer hands than hers and return to the

corridors around the basin, where she might after a time reinvent herself and come back

into this temple as a novice, ready to learn the way to fold light. If, on the other hand, she

was simply shunned, as Jokalaylau clearly wanted, if she was driven from this miraculous

place back into the wilderness outside, what would she do? Without anyone to guide her,

what knowledge did she possess to help choose between the ways ahead? None. Her tears

dried after a time, but what came in their place was worse: a sense of desolation that could

only be Hell itself, or some neighboring province, divided from the main by infernal jailers,

made to punish women who had loved immoderately and who had lost perfection, for want

of a little shame.

In his last letter to his son, written the night before he boarded a ship bound for France —

his mission to spread the gospel of the Tabula Rasa across Europe—
Roxborough, the

scourge of Maestros, had set down the substance of a nightmare from which he'd just woken.

I dreamed that I drove in my coach through the damnable streets of Clerkenwell, he wrote,

I need not name my destination. You know it, and you know too what infamies were planned

there. As is the way in dreams, I was bereft of self-government, for though I called out many

times to the driver, begging him, for my soul's sake, not to take me back to that house, my

words had no power to persuade him. As the coach turned the corner, however, and the

Maestro Sartori's house came in sight, Bellamare reared up affrighted and would go no

further. She was ever my favorite bay, and I felt such a flood of gratitude towards her for

refusing to carry me to that unholy step that I climbed from the coach to speak my thanks

into her ear.

And lo! as my foot touched the ground the cobbles spoke up like living things, their voices

stony but raised in a hideous lamentation, and at the sound of their anguish the very bricks

of the houses in that street, and the roofs and railings and chimneys, all made similar cry,

their voices joined in sorrowful testament to Heaven. I never heard a
din its like, but I could

not stop my ears against it, for was their pain not in some part of my
making? And I heard

them say:

Lord, we are but unbaptized things and have no hopes to come into
your Kingdom, but we

beseech you to bring some storm down upon us and grind us into dust
with your righteous

thunder, that we may be scourged and destroyed and not suffer
complicity with the deeds

performed in our sight.

My son, I marveled at their clamor, and wept too, and was ashamed,
hearing them make

this appeal to the Almighty, knowing that I was a thousand times
more accountable than

they. O! how I wished my feet might carry me away to some less
odious place! I swear at

that moment I would have judged the heart of a fiery furnace an
agreeable place, and lain my

head there with hosannahs, rather than be where these deeds had
been done. But I could not

retreat. On the contrary, my mutinous limbs carried me to the very
doorstep of that house.

There was foamy blood upon the threshold, as though the martyrs had
that night marked the

place so that the Angel of Destruction might find it, and cause the
earth to gape 'neath it, and

commit it to the Abyss. And from within was a sound of idle chatter as
the men I had known

debated their profane philosophies.

I went down on my knees in the blood, calling to those within to come out and join me in

begging forgiveness of the Almighty, but they scorned me with much laughter, and called me

coward and fool, and told me to go on my way. This I presently did, with much haste, and did

escape the street with the cobbles telling me I should go about my crusade without fear of

God's retribution, for I had turned my back on the sin of that house.

That was my dream. I am setting it down straightway, and will have this letter sent post

haste, that you may be warned what harm there is in that place and not be tempted to enter

Clerkenwell or even stray south of Islington while I am gone from you. For my dream

instructs me that the street will be forfeit, in due course, for the crimes it has entertained,

and I would not wish one hair of your sweet head harmed for the deeds I in my delirium

committed against the edicts of Our Lord. Though the Almighty did offer His only begotten

Son to suffer and die for our sins, I know that He would not ask that same sacrifice of me,

knowing that I am His humblest servant, and pray only to be made His instrument until I

quit this vale and go to Judgment.

May the Lord God keep you in His care until I embrace you again.

The ship Roxborough boarded a few hours after finishing this letter went down a mile out

of Dover harbor, in a squall that troubled no other vessel in the vicinity but overtook the

purger's ship and sank it in less than a minute. All hands were lost.

The day after the letter arrived, the recipient, still tearful with the news, went to seek

solace at the stables of his father's bay, Bellamare. The horse had been jittery since her

master's departure and, though she knew Roxborough's son well, kicked out at his approach,

striking him in the abdomen. The blow was not instantly fatal, but with stomach and spleen

split wide, the youth was dead in six days. Thus he preceded his father, whose body was not

washed up for another week, to the family grave.

Pie 'oh' pah had recounted this sorry story to Gentle as they'd traveled from L'Himby to

the Cradle of Chzercemit in search of Scopique, It was one of many tales the mystif had told

on that journey, offering them not as biographical details, though of course many of them

were precisely that, but as entertainment, comedic, absurd, or melancholy, that usually

opened with: "I heard about this fellow once ..."

Sometimes the stories were told within a few minutes, but Pie had lingered over this one,

repeating word for word the text of Roxborough's letter, though to this day Gentle didn't

know how the mystif had come by it. He understood why it had committed the prophecy to

memory, however, and why it had taken such trouble to repeat it for Gentle. It had half

believed there was some significance in Roxborough's dream, and just as it had educated

Gentle on other matters pertaining to his concealed self, so it had told this tale to warn the

Maestro of dangers the future might bring.

That future was now. As the hours since Monday's return crept on, and Jude still didn't

return, Gentle was reduced to picking his recollections of Roxborough's letter apart, looking

for some clue in the purger's words as to what threat might be coming to the doorstep. He

even wondered if the man who'd written the letter was numbered among the revenants who

by midmorning could be glimpsed in the heat haze. Had Roxborough come back to watch the

demise of the street he'd called damnable? If he had—if he listened at the step the way he

had in his dream—he was most likely as frustrated as the occupants, wishing they'd get on

with the work he hoped would invite calamity.

But however many doubts Gentle harbored concerning Jude, he could not believe she

would conspire against the Great Work. If she said it was unsafe she had good reason for so

saying, and, though every sinew in Gentle's body raged at inactivity, he refused to go

downstairs and bring the stones up into the Meditation Room, for fear their very presence

might tempt him into warming the circle. Instead he waited, and waited, and waited, while

the heat outside rose and the air in the Meditation Room grew sour

with his frustration. As

Scopique had said, a working like this required months of preparation, not hours, and now

even those hours were being steadily whittled away. How late could he afford to postpone

the ceremony before he gave up on Jude and began? Until six? Until nightfall? It was an

imponderable.

There were signs of unease outside the house as well as in. Scarcely a minute went by

without a new siren being added to the chorus of whoops and wails from every compass

point. Several times through the morning, bells began chiming from steeples in the vicinity,

their peals neither summons nor celebration but alarm. There were even cries occasionally:

shouts and screams from distant streets carried to the open windows on air now hot enough

to make the dead sweat.

And then, just after one in the afternoon, Clem came up the stairs, his eyes wide. It was

Taylor who spoke, and there was excitement in his voice.

"Somebody's come into the house, Gentle."

"Who?"

"A spirit of some kind, from the Dominions. She's downstairs."

"Is it Jude?"

"No. This is a real power. Can't you smell her? I know you've given up women, but your

nose still works, doesn't it?"

He led Gentle out onto the landing. The house lay quiet below. Gentle sensed nothing.

"Where is she?"

Clem looked puzzled. "She was here a moment ago, I swear."

Gentle went to the top of the stairs, but Clem held him back.

"Angels first," he said, but Gentle was already beginning his descent, relieved that the

torpor of the last few hours was over and eager to meet this visitor. Perhaps she carried a

message from Jude.

The front door stood open. There was a pool of beer glinting on the step, but no sign of

Monday.

"Where's the boy?" Gentle asked.

"He's outside, sky watching. He says he saw a flying saucer."

Gentle threw his companion a quizzical look. Clem didn't reply but laid his hand on

Gentle's shoulder, his eyes going to the door of the dining room. From inside came the barely

audible sound of sobbing.

"Mama," Gentle said, and gave up any caution, hurrying down the rest of the flight with

Clem in pursuit.

By the time he reached Celestine's room, the sound of her sobs had already disappeared.

Gentle drew a defensive breath, took hold of the handle, and put his shoulder to the door. It

wasn't locked but swung open smoothly, delivering him inside. The room was ill-lit, the

drooping, mildewed curtains still heavy enough to keep the sun to a few dusty beams. They

fell on the empty mattress in the middle of the floor. Its sometime occupant, whom Gentle

had not expected to see standing again, was at the other end of the room, her tears subsided

to whimpers. She had brought one of the sheets from her bed with her and, seeing her son

enter, drew it up to her breastbone. Then she turned her attention back towards the wall she

was standing close to and studied it. A pipe had burst somewhere behind the brick, Gentle

supposed. He could hear water running freely.

"It's all right. Mama," he said. "Nothing's going to hurt you."

Celestine didn't reply.. She'd raised her left hand in front of her face and was looking at the

palm, as if into a mirror.

"It's still here," Clem said.

"Where?" Gentle asked him.

He nodded in the direction of Celestine, and Gentle instantly left his side, opening his arms

as he went to offer the haunted air a fresh target.

"Come on," he said. "Wherever you are. Come on."

Halfway between the door and his mother he felt a cool drizzle strike his face, so fine it

was invisible. Its touch was not unpleasant. In fact it was refreshing, and he let out an

appreciative gasp.

"It's raining in here," he said.

"It's the Goddess," Celestine replied.

She looked up from studying her hand, which Gentle now saw was running with water, as

though a spring had appeared in her palm.

"What Goddess?" Gentle asked her.

"Uma Umagammagi," his mother replied.

"Why were you crying, Mama?"

"I thought I was dying. I thought She'd come to take me."

"But She hasn't."

"I'm still here, child."

"Then what does She want?"

Celestine extended her arm to Gentle. "She wants us to make peace," she said. "Join me in

the waters, child."

Gentle took hold of his mother's hand, and she drew him towards her, turning her face up

to the rain as she did so. The last traces of her tears were being washed away, and a look of

ecstasy appeared where there had been grief. Gentle felt it too. His eyes wanted to flicker

closed; his body wanted to swoon. But he resisted the rain's blandishments, tempting as

they were. If it carried some message for him, he needed to know it quickly and end these

delays before they cost the Reconciliation dearly.

“Tell me,” he said, as he came to his mother's side, “whether you're here to stay; tell me....”

But the rain made no reply, at least none that he could grasp. Perhaps his mother heard

more than he did, however, because there were smiles on her glistening face, and her grip on

Gentle's hand became more possessive. She let the sheet she'd held to her bosom drop, so

that the rains could stroke her breasts and belly, and Gentle's gaze took full account of her

nakedness. The wounds she'd sustained in her struggles with Dowd and Sartori still mark ed

her body, but they only served to prove her perfection, and although he knew the felony

here, he couldn't stem his feelings.

She put her free hand up to her face and with thumb and forefingers emptied the shallow

pools of her sockets, then once again opened her eyes. They found Gentle too quickly for him

to conceal himself, and he felt a shock as their looks met, not just because she read his

desire, but because he found the same in her face.

He wrested his hand from hers and backed away, his tongue fumbling with denials. She

was far less abashed than he. Her eyes remained fixed on him, and she called him back into

the rain with words of invitation so soft they were barely more than sighs. When he

continued to retreat, she turned to more specific exhortations.

“The Goddess wants to know you,” she said. “She needs to understand your purpose.”

“My... Father's... business,” Gentle replied, the words as much defense as explanation,

shielding him from this seduction with the weight of his purpose.

But the Goddess, if that was what this rain really was, wouldn't be shaken off so easily. He

saw a look of distress cross his mother's face as the vapors deserted her to move in pursuit

of him. They passed through a spear of sun as they came, and threw out rainbows.

“Don't be afraid of Her,” Gentle heard Clem say behind him. “You've got nothing to hide.”

Perhaps this was true, but he kept on retreating nevertheless, as much from his mother as

from the vapor, until he felt the comfort of his angels at his back.

“Guard me,” he told them, his voice tremulous.

Clem wrapped his arms around Gentle's shoulders. “It's a woman, Maestro,” he murmured.

“Since when were you afraid of women?”

“Since always,” Gentle replied. “Hold on, for Christ's sake.”

Then the rain broke against their faces, and Clem let out a sigh of pleasure as its languor

enclosed them. Gentle seized hard hold of his protector's arms, his fingers digging deep, but

if the rain had the sinew to detach him from Clem's embrace it didn't attempt to do so. It

lingered around their heads for no more than thirty seconds, then simply passed away

through the open door.

As soon as it had gone, Gentle turned to Clem. “Nothing to hide, eh?” he said. “I don't think

She believed you.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No. She just got inside my head. Why does every damn thing want to get inside my head?”

“It must be the view,” Tay remarked, grinning with his lover's lips.

“She only wanted to know if your purpose was pure, child,” Celestine said.

“Pure?” Gentle said, staring at his mother venomously. “What right has She got to judge

me?”

“What you call your Father's business is the business of every soul in the Imajica.”

She had not yet claimed her modesty from the floor, and as she approached him he averted

his eyes.

“Cover yourself, Mother,” he said. “For God's sake, cover yourself.”

Then he turned and headed out into the hallway, calling after the intruder as he went.

“Wherever you are,” he yelled, “I want you out of this house! Clem, look downstairs. I'll go

up.”

He pelted up the flight, his fury mounting at the thought of this spirit invading the

Meditation Room. The door stood open. Little Ease was cowering in the corner when he

entered.

“Where is She?” Gentle demanded. “Is She here?”

“Is who here?”

Gentle didn't reply but went from wall to wall like a prisoner, beating his palms against

them. There was no sound of running water from the brick, however, nor any drizzle,

however fine, in the air. Content that the room was free of the visitor's taint, he returned to

the door.

"If it starts raining in here," he said to Little Ease, "yell blue murder."

"Any color you like, Liberatore."

Gentle slammed the door and headed along the landing, searching all the rooms in the

same manner. Finding them empty he climbed the last flight and went through the rooms

above. Their air was bone-dry. But as he started back down the stairs he heard laughter

from the street. It was Monday, though the sound he was making was lighter than Gentle had

ever heard from his lips before. Suspicious of this music, he picked up the speed of his

descent, meeting Clem at the bottom of the stairs and telling him the rooms were empty

below, then racing across the hallway to the front door.

Monday had been busy with his chalks since Gentle had last crossed the threshold. The

pavement at the bottom of the steps was covered with his designs: not copies of glamour

girls this time but elaborate abstractions that spilled over the curb and onto the sun -

softened tarmac. The artist had left off his work, however, and was now standing in the

middle of the street. Gentle recognized the language of his body instantly. Head thrown

back, eyes closed, he was bathing in the air. "Monday!"

But the boy didn't hear. He continued to luxuriate in this unction, the water running over

his close-cropped skull like rippling fingers, and he might have gone on bathing until he

drowned in it had Gentle's approach not driven the Goddess off. The rain went from the air

in a heartbeat, and Monday's eyes opened. He squinted against the sky, his laughter

faltering.

"Where'd the rain go?" he said. "There was no rain."

"What do you call this, boss?" Monday said, proffering arms from which the last of the

waters still ran. "Take it from me, it wasn't rain."

"Whatever it was, it was fine by me," Monday said. He hauled his sodden T-shirt up over

his head and used it as a mop to wipe his face. "Are you all right, boss?"

Gentle was scanning the street, looking for some sign of the Goddess.

"I will be," he said. "You go back to work, huh? You haven't decorated the door yet." "Wha t

do you want on it?"

"You're the artist," Gentle said, distracted from the conversation by the state of the street.

He hadn't realized until now how full of presences it had become, the revenants not simply

occupying the pavement but hovering in the wilted foliage like hanged men or keeping their

vigils on the eaves. They were benign enough, he thought. They had good reason to wish him

well in this endeavor. Half a year ago, on the night he and Pie had left on their travels, the

mystif had given Gentle a grim lesson in the pain that the spirits of this and every other

Dominion suffered.

“No spirit is happy,” Pie had said. “They haunt the doors, waiting to leave, but there’s

nowhere for them to go.”

But hadn’t there been some hope mooted then, that at the end of the journey ahead lay a

solution to the anguish of the dead? Pie had known that solution even then, and must have

longed to call Gentle Reconciler, to tell him that the wit lay somewhere in his head to open

the doors at which the dead stood waiting and let them into Heaven.

“Be patient,” he murmured, knowing the revenants heard. “It’ll be soon, I swear. It’ll be

soon.”

The sun was drying the Goddess’s rain from his face, and, happy to stay out in the heat

until he was dry, he wandered away from the house, while Monday resumed his whistling on

the step. What a place this had become, Gentle thought: angels in the house behind him,

lascivious rains in the street, ghosts in the trees. And he, the Maestro, wandering among

them, ready to do the deed that would change their worlds forever.

There would never be

such a day again.

His optimistic mood darkened, however, as he approached the end of the street, for other

than the sound of his footsteps, and the shrill noise of Monday's whistle, the world was

absolutely quiet. The alarms that had raised such a din earlier in the day were now hushed.

No bell rang, no voice cried out. It was as if all life beyond this thoroughfare had taken a vow

of silence. He picked up his pace. Either his agitation was contagious or else the revenants

that lingered at the end of the street were more jittery than those closer to the house. They

milled around, their numbers, and perhaps their unease, sufficient to disturb the baked dust

in the gutter. They made no attempt to impede his progress but parted like a cold curtain,

allowing him to step over the invisible boundary of Gamut Street. He looked in both

directions. The dogs that had gathered here for a time had gone; the birds had fled every

eave and telephone wire. He held his breath and listened through the whine in his head for

some evidence of life: an engine, a siren, a shout. But there was nothing. His unease now

profound, he glanced back into Gamut Street. Loath though he was to leave it, he supposed it

would be safe while the revenants remained at the perimeter. Though they were too

insubstantial to protect the street from attackers, it was doubtful that

anyone would dare

enter while they milled and churned at the corner. Taking that small comfort, he headed

towards Gray's Inn Road, his walk becoming a run as he went. The heat was less welcome

now. It made his legs heavy and his lungs burn. But he didn't slacken his pace until he

reached the intersection.

Gray's Inn Road and High Holborn were two of the city's major conduits. Had he stood at

this corner on the coldest December midnight, there would have been some traffic upon one

or the other. But there was nothing now; nor was there a murmur from any street, square,

alleyway, or circus within earshot. The sphere of influence that had left Gamut Street

untrammelled for two centuries had apparently spread, and if the citizens of London were

still in residence they were keeping clear of this harrowed terrain. • And yet, despite the

silence, the air was not unfreighted. There was something else upon it, which kept Gentle

from turning on his heel and wandering back to Gamut Street: a smell so subtle that the tang

of cooking asphalt almost overwhelmed it, but so unmistakable he could not ignore even the

traces that came his way. He lingered at the corner, waiting for another gust of wind. It came

after a time, confirming his suspicions. There was only one source for this sickly perfume,

and only one man in this city—no, in this Dominion—who had access

to that source. The In

Ovo had been opened again, and this time the beasts that had been called forth were not the

nonsense stuff he'd encountered at the tower. These were of another magnitude entirely.

He'd seen and smelled their like only once, two hundred years before, and they'd done

incalculable mischief. Given that the breeze was so languid, their scent could not be coming

all the way from Highgate. Sartori and his legion were considerably closer than that:

perhaps ten streets away, perhaps two, perhaps about to turn the corner of Gray's Inn Road

and come in sight.

There was no time left for prevarication. Whatever danger Jude had discovered, or

believed she'd discovered, it was notional. This scent, on the other hand, and the entities

that oozed it, were not. He could not afford to delay his final preparations any longer. He

forsook his watching place and started back toward the house as though these hordes were

already on his heels. The revenants scattered as he rounded the corner and raced down the

street. Monday was working on the door, but he dropped his colors as he heard the

Maestro's summons.

"It's time, boy!" Gentle yelled, mounting the steps in a single bound. "Start bringing the

stones upstairs.”

“We're starting?”

“We're starting.”

Monday grinned, whooped, and ducked into the house, leaving Gentle to pause and admire

what now adorned the door. It was just a sketch as yet, but the boy's draftsmanship was

sufficient for his purpose. He'd drawn an enormous eye, with beams of light emanating from

it in all directions. Gentle stepped into the house, pleased at the thought that this burning

gaze would greet anyone, friend or foe, who came to the threshold. Then he closed the door

and bolted it. When I next step out, he thought, the work of my Father will be done.

WHATEVER DEBATES AND QUARRELS went on in Uma
Umagammagi's temple while Jude

waited on the shore, they brought the procession of postulants to a
halt. The tide carried no

more women or children to the shore, and after a time the waters
became subdued and

finally becalmed, as if their inspiring forces were so preoccupied that
all other matters had

become inconsequential. Without a watch Jude could only guess at
how long a time passed

while she waited, but occasional glances up at the comet showed her
that it was to be

measured in hours rather than minutes. Did the Goddesses fully
comprehend how urgent a

business this was, she wondered, or had the ages they'd spent in
captivity and exile so

slowed their sensibilities that their debate might last days and they
not realize how much

time had passed?

She blamed herself for not making the urgency .of this more plain to
them. The day would

be creeping on in the Fifth, and even if Gentle had been persuaded to
postpone his

preparations for a time, he would not do so indefinitely. Nor could she
blame him. All he had

was a message— brought by a less than reliable courier—that things
were not safe. That

wouldn't be enough to make him put the Reconciliation in jeopardy.
He hadn't seen the

horrors she'd seen in the Boston Bowl, so he had no real
comprehension of what was at

stake here. He was, in her own words, about his Father's business, and
the possibility that

such business might mark the end of the Imajica was surely very far
from his mind.

She was twice distracted from these melancholy thoughts: the first
tune when a young girl

came down to the shore to offer her something to eat and drink,
which she gratefully

accepted; the second when nature called and she was obliged to scout
around the island for

a sheltered place to squat and empty her bladder. To be shy about
passing water in this

place was of course absurd and she knew it, but she was still a woman
of the Fifth, however

many miracles she'd seen. Maybe she'd learn to become blithe about
such functions

eventually, but it would take time.

As she returned from the place she'd found among the rocks, lighter
by a bladderful, the

song at the temple door, which had dropped away to a murmur and
disappeared a long time

before, began again. Instead of going back to her place of vigil, she
headed around the

temple to the door, her stride lent spring by the sight of the waters in
the basin, which were

stirring from their inertia and once again breaking against the shore. It
seemed the

Goddesses had made their decision. She wanted to hear the news as
soon as possible, of

course, but she couldn't help but feel a little like an accused woman returning into a

courtroom.

There was an air of expectancy among those at the door. Some of the women were smiling;

others looked grim. If they had any knowledge of the judgment, they were interpreting it in

radically different ways.

“Should I go in?” Jude asked the woman who'd brought her food.

The other nodded vigorously, though Jude suspected she simply wanted to expedite a

process which had delayed them all. Jude stepped back through the water curtain and into

the temple. It had changed. Though the sense that her inner and outer sights were here

united was as strong as ever, what they perceived was far less reassuring than it had been.

There was no sign of the origami light, nor of the bodies these forms had been derived from.

She was, it seemed, the sole representative of the fleshly here, and scrutinized by an

incandescence far less tender than Uma Umagammagi's gaze had been. She squinted against

it, but her lids and lashes could do little to mellow a light that burned in her head rather

than her corneas. Its blaze intimidated her, and she wanted to retreat before it, but the

thought that Uma Umagammagi's consolation lay somewhere in its midst kept her from

doing so.

“Goddess?” she ventured.

“We're here together,” came the reply. “Jokalaylau, Tishalulle, and Myself.”

As the roll was called, Jude began to distinguish shapes within the brilliance. They were

not the inexhaustible glyphs she'd last seen in this place. What she saw suggested not

abstractions but sinuous human forms, hovering in the air above her. This was a strange

turnabout, she thought. Why, when she'd previously been able to share the essential natures

of Jokalaylau and Uma Umagammagi, was she now being presented with lowlier faces? It

didn't augur well for the exchange ahead. Had They clothed Themselves in trivial matter

because They'd decided she wasn't worthy to lay eyes on the truth of Them? She

concentrated hard to grasp the details of Their appearance, but either her sight wasn't

sophisticated enough or They were resisting her. Whichever, she could hold only

impressions in her head: that They were naked, that Their eyes were incandescent, that

Their bodies ran with water.

“Do you see Us?” Jude heard a voice she didn't recognize—Tishalulle's, she presumed—ask.

“Yes, of course,” she said. “But not... not completely.”

“Didn't I tell You?” Uma Umagammagi said.

“Tell me what?” Jude wanted to know, then realized the remark

wasn't directed at her but

at the other Goddesses.

"It's extraordinary," said Tishalull?.

The pliancy of Her voice was seductive, and as Jude attended to it Her nebulous form

became more particular, the syllables bringing sight along with them. Her face was Oriental

in cast, and without a trace of color in cheek or lip or lash. Yet what should have been bland

was instead exquisitely subtle, its symmetry and its curves delineated by the light that

flickered in Her eyes. Below its calm, Her body was another matter entirely. Her entire

length was covered by what Jude at first took to be tattoos of some kind, following the

sweep of Her anatomy. But the more she studied the Goddess-rand she did so without

embarrassment—the more she saw movement in these marks. They weren't on Her but in

Hef, thousands of tiny flaps opening and closing rhythmically. There were several shoals of

them, she saw, each swept by independent waves of motion. One rose up from Her groin,

where the inspiration of them all had its place; others swept down Her limbs, out to Her

fingertips and toes, the motion of each shoal converging every ten or fifteen seconds, at

which point a second substance seemed to spring from these slits, forming the Goddess

afresh in front of Jude rs astonished eyes.

“I think you should know that I've met your Gentle,” Tishalutle” said.
“I embraced him in

the Cradle.”

“He's not mine any longer,” Jude replied.

“Do you care, Judith?”

“Of course she doesn't care,” came Jokalaylau's response. “She's got
his brother to keep her

bed warm. The Autarch. The butcher of Yzordderrex.”

Jude turned her gaze towards the Goddess of the High Snows. The
particulars of Her form

were more elusive than Tishalull?'s had been, but Jude was
determined to know what She

looked like, and fixed her gaze on the spiral of cold flame that burned
in Her core, watching

until it spat bright arcs out against the limits of Jokalaylau's body. The
light of this collision

was brief, but by it Jude got her glimpse. An imperious Negress, Her
blazing eyes heavy -lid-

den, hovered there, Her hands crossed at the wrist, then turned back
on themselves to knit

their fingers. She was not, after all, such a terrifying sight. But sensing
that Her face had

been found, the Goddess responded with a sudden transformation. Her
lush features were

mummified in a heartbeat, the eyes sinking away, the lips withering
and retracting. Worms

devoured the tongue that poked between Her teeth.

Jude let out a cry of revulsion, and the eyes reignited in Jokalaylau's
sockets, the wormy

mouth gaping as hard laughter rose from Her throat and echoed around the temple.

“She's not so remarkable, sister,” Jokalaylau said. “Look at her shake.”

“Let her alone,” Uma Umagammagi replied. “Why must You always be testing people?”

“We've endured because We've faced the worse and survived,” Jokalaylau replied. “This

one would have died in the snow.”

“I doubt that,” Urnagammagi said. “Sweet Judith—”

Still shaking, Jude took a moment to respond. “I'm not afraid of death,” she said to

Jokalaylau. “Or cheap tricks.”

Again, Umagammagi spoke. “Judith,” she said. “Look at Me.”

“I just want Her to understand—”

“Sweet Judith ...”

”—I'm not going to be bullied.”

“... look at Me.”

Now Jude did so, and this time there was no need to pierce the ambiguities. The Goddess

appeared to Jude without challenge or labor, and the sight was a paradox. Uma Umagammagi

was an ancient, Her body so withered it was almost sexless, Her hairless skull subtly

elongated, Her tiny eyes so wreathed in creases they were barely more than gleams. But the

beauty of Her glyph was here in this flesh: its ripples, its flickers, its ceaseless, effortless

motion.

“Do you see now?” Uma Umagammagi said.

“Yes, I see.”

“We haven't forgotten the flesh We had,” She said to Jude. “We've known the frailties of

your condition. We remember its pains and discomforts. We know what it is to be wounded:

in the heart, in the head, in the womb.”

“I see that,” Jude said.

“Nor would We have trusted you with knowledge of Our ' ? frailty, unless We believed that

you might one day be among Us.”

“Among You?”

“Some divinities arise from the collective will of peoples; some are made in the heat of

stars; some are abstractions. But some—dare we say the finest, the most loving? — are the

higher minds of living souls. We are such divinities, sister, and Our memories of the lives We

lived and the deaths We died are still sharp. We understand you, sweet Judith, and We don't

accuse you.”

“Not even Jokalaylau?” Jude said.

The Goddess of the High Snows made Herself apparent to Her length and breadth, showing

Jude Her entire form in a single glance. There was a paleness moving beneath Her skin, and

Her eyes, that had been so luminous, were dark. But they were fixed on Jude. She felt the

stare like a stab.

“I want you to see,” She said, “what the Father of the father of the child in you did to My

devotees.”

Jude recognized the paleness now. It was a blizzard, driven through the Goddess's form by

pain, and pricking every part of Her. Its drifts were mountainous, but at Jokalaylau's behest

they moved and uncovered the site of an atrocity. The bodies of women lay frozen where

they'd fallen, their eyes carved out, their breasts taken off. Some lay close to smaller bodies:

violated children, dismembered babes.

“This is a little part of a little part of what He did,” Jokalaylau said.

Appalling as the sight was, Jude didn't flinch this time, but stared on at the horror until

Jokalaylau drew a cold shroud back over it.

“What are You asking me to do?” Jude said. “Are You telling me I should add another body

to the heap? Another child?” She laid her hand on her belly. “This child?”

She hadn't realized until now how covetous she felt of the soul she was nurturing.

“It belongs to the butcher,” Jokalaylau said.

“No,” Jude quietly replied. “It belongs to me.”

“You'll be responsible for its works?”

“Of course,” she said, strangely' exhilarated by this promise. “Bad can be made from good,

Goddess; whole things from broken.”

She wondered as she spoke if They knew where these sentiments originated; whether

They understood that she was turning the Reconciler's philosophies to her own maternal

ends. If They did, They seemed not to think less of her for it.

“Then Our spirits go with you, sister,” Tishalulle' said.

“Are You sending me away again?” Jude asked.

“You came here looking for an answer, and We can provide it.”

“We understand the urgency of this,” Uma Umagammagi said. “And We haven't held you

here without cause. I've been across the Dominions while you waited, looking for some clue

to this puzzle. There are Maestros waiting in every Dominion to undertake the

Reconciliation—”

“Then Gentle didn't begin?”

“No. He's waiting for your word.”

“And what should I tell him?”

“I've searched their hearts, looking for some plot—”

“Did You find any?”

“No. They're not pure, of course. Who is? But all of them want the Imajica whole. All of

them believe the working they're ready to perform can succeed,”

“Do You believe it too?”

“Yes, We do,” said Tishalulle. “Of course they don't realize they're completing the circle. If

they did, perhaps they'd think again.”

“Why?”

“Because the circle belongs to Our sex, not to theirs,” Jokalaylau put in.

“Not true,” Umagammagi said. “It belongs to any mind that cares to conceive it.”

“Men are incapable of conceiving, sister,” Jokalaylau replied, “Or hadn't You heard?”

Umagammagi smiled. “Even that may change, if We can coax them from their terrors.”

Her words begged many questions, and She knew it. Her eyes fixed on Jude, and She said,

“We'll have time for these works when you come back. But now I know you need to be fleet.”

“Tell Gentle to be a Reconciler,” TishatUll6 said, “But share nothing that We've said with

him.”

“Do I have to be the one to tell him?” Jude said to Umagammagi. “If You've been there once,

can't You go again and give him the news? I want to stay here.”

“We understand. But he's in no mood to trust Us, believe me. The message must come from

you, in the flesh.”

“I see,” Jude said.

There was no room for persuasion, it seemed. She had the plain answer she'd come here

hoping to find. Now she had to return to the Fifth with it, unpalatable as that journey would

be.

“May I ask one question before I go?” she said.

“Ask it,” said Umagammagi.

“Why did You show Yourself to me this way?”

It was Tishalulle' who replied. “So that you'll know Us when We come to sit at your table

or walk beside you in the street,” She said. “Will you come to the Fifth?”

“Perhaps, in time. We'll have work there, when the Reconciliation's achieved.”

Jude imagined the transformations she'd seen outside wrought in London: Mother Thames

climbing her banks, depositing the filth she'd been choked by in Whitehall and the Mall, then

sweeping through the city, making its squares into swimming pools and its cathedrals into

playgrounds. The thought made her light.

“I'll be waiting for you,” she said and, thanking them, made her departure.

When she got outside the waters were waiting for her, the surf lush as pillows. She didn't

delay, but went straight down the beach and threw herself into its comfort. This time there

was no need to swim; the tide knew its business. It picked her up and carried her across the

basin like a foamy chariot, delivering her back to the rocks from which she'd first taken her

plunge. Lotti Yap and Paramarola had gone, but finding her way out of the palace would be

easier now than when she'd first arrived. The waters had been at work on many of the

corridors and chambers that ran around the basin, and on the courtyards beyond, opening

up vistas of glittering pools and fountains that stretched to the rubble of the palace gates.

The air was clearer than it had been, and she could see the Kesparates spread below. She

could even see the harbor, and the sea at its walls, its own tide longing, no doubt, to share

this enchantment.

She made her way back to the staircase, to find that the waters that had carried her here

had receded from the bottom, leaving heaps of flotsam and jetsam behind. Picking through

it, like a beachcomber granted her paradise, was Lotti Yap, and sitting on the lower steps,

chatting to Paramarola, Hoi-Polloi Peccable.

After they'd greeted each other, Hoi-Polloi explained how she'd prevaricated before

committing herself to the river that had separated her from Jude. Once she jumped in,

however, it had carried her safely through the palace and delivered her to this spot. Minutes

later it had been called to other duties and disappeared.

"We'd pretty much given up on you," said Lotti Yap. She was busy plucking the petitions

and prayers from among the trash, unfolding them, scanning them, then pocketing them.

"Did you get to see the Goddesses?"

"Yes, I did,"

"Are They beautiful?" Paramarola asked.

"In a way."

"Tell us every detail."

"I haven't time. I have to get back to the Fifth."

"You got your answer, then," Lotti said.

"I did. And we've got nothing to fear."

"Didn't I tell you?" she replied. "Everything's well with the world."

As Jude started to pick her way through the debris, Hoi-Polloi said,
"Can two of us go? I'

"I thought you were going to wait with us," Paramarola said.

"I'll come back and see the Goddesses," Hoi-Polloi replied. "I'd like to see the Fifth before

everything changes. It is going to change, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Jude said.

"Do you want something to read on your travels?" Lotti asked them, proffering a fistful of

petitions. "It's amazing, what people write."

"All those should go to the island," Jude said. "Take them with you. Leave them at the

temple door."

"But the Goddesses can't answer every prayer," Lotti said. "Lost lovers, crippled children —

" "Don't be so sure," Jude told her. "It's going to be a new day."

Then, with Hoi-Polloi at her side, she made the hour's second round of farewells and

headed away in the general direction of the gate.

"Do you really believe what you said to Lotti?" Hoi-Polloi asked her when they'd left the

staircase far behind "Is tomorrow going to be so different from today?"

“One way or another,” Jude said.

The reply was more ambiguous than she'd intended, but then perhaps her tongue was

wiser than it knew. Though she was going from this holy place with the word of powers far

more discerning than she, their reassurance could not quite erase the memory of the bowl in

Oscar's treasure room and the prophecy of dust it had shown her.

She silently admonished herself for her lack of faith. Where did this seam of arrogance

come from, that she could doubt the wisdom of Uma Umagammagi Herself? From now on,

she would put such ambivalence away. Maybe tomorrow, or some blissful day after, she'd

meet the Goddesses on the streets of the Fifth and tell Them that even after Their comforts

she'd still nursed some ridiculous nub of doubt. But for today she'd bow to Their wisdoms

and return to the Reconciler as a bearer of good news.

Gentle wasn't the only occupant of the house in Gamut Street who'd smelled the In Ovo on

the late-afternoon breeze; so had one who'd once been a prisoner in that Hell between

Dominions: Little Ease. When Gentle returned to the Meditation Room, having set Monday

the task of bringing the stones up the stairs and sent Clem around the house securing it, he

found his sometime tormentor up at the window. There were tears on its cheeks, and its

teeth were chattering uncontrollably.

"He's coming, isn't he?" it said. "Did you see him, Liberatore?"

"Yes, he is, and no, I didn't," Gentle said. "Don't look so terrified, Easy. I'm not going to let

him lay a finger on you."

The creature put on its wretched grin, but with its teeth in such motion the effect was

grotesque.

"You sound like my mother," it said. "Every night she used to tell me: nothing's going to

hurt you, nothing's going to hurt you."

"I remind you of your mother?"

"Give or take a tit," Little Ease replied. "She was no beauty, it has to be said. But all my

fathers loved her."

There was a din from downstairs, and the creature jumped.

"It's all right," Gentle said. "It's just Clem closing the shutters."

"I want to be of some use. What can I do?"

"You can do what you're doing. Watch the street. If you see anything out there —"

"I know. Scream blue murder."

With the windows shuttered below, the house was thrown into a sudden dusk, in which

Clem, Monday, and Gentle labored without word or pause. By the time all the stones had

been fetched upstairs the day outside had also dwindled into twilight, and Gentle found

Little Ease leaning out of the window, stripping fistfuls of leaves from the tree outside and

flinging them back into the room. When he asked it what it was up to it explained that, with

evening fallen, the street was invisible through the foliage, so it was clearing it away.

"When T begin the Reconciliation maybe you should keep watch from the floor above,"

Gentle suggested.

"Whatever you suggest, Liberatore," Little Ease said. It slid down from the sill and stared

up at him. "But before I go, if you don't mind, I have a little request," it said.

"Yes?"

"It's delicate."

"Don't be afraid. Ask it."

"I know you're about to start the working, and I think this may be the last time I have the

honor of your company. When the Reconciliation's achieved you'll be a great man. I don't

mean to say you're not one already," it added hurriedly. "You are, of course. But after tonight

everyone will know you're the Reconciler, and you did what Christos Himself couldn't do.

You'll be made Pope, and you'll write your memoirs"—Gentle laughed—"and I'll never see

you again. And that's as it should be. That's right and proper. But before you become

hopelessly famous and feted, I wondered: would you .., bless me?"

"Bless you?"

Little Ease raised its long—fingered hands to ward off the rejection it thought was coming.

"I understand! I understand!" it said. "You've already been kind to me beyond measure—"

"It's not that," said Gentle, going down on his haunches in front of the creature the way he

had when its head had been beneath Jude's heel. "I'd do it if I could. But Ease, I don't know

how. I'm not a Messiah. I've never had a ministry. I've never preached a gospel or raised the

dead."

"You've got your disciples," Little Ease said.

"No. I've had some friends who've endured me, and some mistresses who've humored me.

But I've never had the power to inspire. I frittered it away on seductions. I don't have the

right to bless anybody. — "

"I'm sorry," the creature said. "I won't mention it again."

Then it did again what it had done when Gentle had set it free: took his hand and laid its

brow upon his palm.

"I'm ready to die for you, Liberatore."

"I'm hoping that won't be necessary."

Little Ease looked up. "Between us?" it said. "So am I."

Its oath made, it returned to gathering up the leaves it had deposited on the floor, putting

plugs of them up its nose to stop the stench. But Gentle told it to let the rest lie. The scent of

the sap was sweeter than the smell that would permeate the house if, or rather when,

Sartori arrived. At the mention of the enemy, Little Ease hoisted itself back up onto the sill.

"Any sign?" Gentle asked it.

"Not that I see."

"But what do you feel?"

"Ah," it said, looking up through the canopy of leaves. "It's such a beautiful night,

Liberatore. But he's going to try and spoil it."

"I think you're right. Stay here a while longer, will you? I want to go around the house with

Clem. If you see anything—"

"They'll hear me in L'Himby," Ease promised.

The beast was as good as its word. Gentle hadn't reached the bottom of the stairs when it

set up a din so loud it brought dust from the rafters. Yelling for

Monday and Clem to make

sure all the doors were bolted, Gentle started up the stairs again, reaching the summit in

time to see the door of the Meditation Room flung open and Little Ease backing through it at

speed, shrieking. Whatever warning the creature was trying to offer, it was

incomprehensible.

Gentle didn't try and interpret it, but raced towards the room, drawing his breath in

readiness to drive Sartori's invaders out. The window was empty when he entered, but the

circle was not. Within the ring of stones two forms were unknotting themselves. He'd never

seen the phenomenon of passage from this perspective before, and he stood as much aghast

as awed. There were too many raw surfaces in this process for comfortable viewing. But he

studied the forms with mounting excitement, certain long before they were reconstituted

that one of the travelers was Jude. The other, when she appeared, was a cross-eyed girl of

seventeen or so, who fell to her knees sobbing with terror and relief the moment her

muscles were her own again. Even Jude, who'd made this journey four times now, was

shaking violently and would have fallen when she stepped from the circle had Gentle not

caught her up.

"The In Ovo..." she gasped, "almost had us...."

Her leg had been gouged from knee to ankle.

"... felt teeth in me...."

"You're all right," Gentle said. "You've still got two legs. Clem! Clem!"

He was already at the door, with Monday in pursuit.

"Have we got something to bind this up?"

"Of course! I'll go—"

"No," said Jude. "Take me down. This is no floor to bleed on."

Monday was left to comfort Hoi—Polloi, while Clem and Gentle carried Jude to the door.

"I've never seen the In Ovo like that before," she said. "Crazy...."

"Sartori's been in," Gentle said, "finding himself an army."

"He certainly stirred them up."

"We were about to give up on you," Clem said.

Jude raised her head. Her skin was waxen with shock, and her smile too tentative to be

joyful. But it was there, at least.

"Never give up on the messenger," she said. "Especially if she's got good news."

It was three hours and four minutes to midnight, and there wasn't time for a lengthy

exchange, but Gentle wanted some explanation—however brief—of what had taken Jude to

Yzordderrex. So she was made comfortable in the front room, which Monday's scavengings

had furnished with pillows, foodstuffs, and even magazines, and there, while Clem bound her

leg and foot, she did her best to encapsulate all that had happened to

her since she'd left the

Retreat.

It didn't make easy telling, and there were a couple of occasions when she attempted to

describe scenes in Yzordderrex and simply gave up, saying that she knew no words to

describe what she'd witnessed and felt. Gentle listened without once interrupting her,

though his expression grew grimmer when she told of how Uma Umagammagi had passed

through the Dominions, seeking out the Synod to be certain their motives were pure.

When she was finished he said, "I was in Yzordderrex too. It's changed quite a bit,"

"For the better," Jude said.

"I don't like ruin, however picturesque it is," Gentle replied.

Jude eyed him strangely at this, but she said nothing.

"Are we safe here?" Hoi—Polloi said, addressing nobody in particular. "It's so dark."

"Course we're safe," Monday said, putting his arm around the girl's shoulders. "We got the

whole fuckin' place sealed up. He's not going to get in, is he, boss?"

"Who?" Jude asked.

"Sartori," said Monday.

"Is he somewhere in the vicinity?"

Gentle's silence was reply enough.

"And you think a few locks are going to keep him out?"

"Won't they?" said Hoi—Polloi.

“Not if he wants to get in,” Jude said.

“He won't,” Gentle replied. “When the Reconciliation begins, there's going to be a flow of

power through this house ... my Father's power.”

The thought was as distasteful to Jude as Gentle assumed it would be to Sartori, but her

response was subtler than revulsion.

“He's your brother,” she reminded him, “Don't be so sure he won't want a taste of what's in

here. And if he does, he'll come and get it.”

He stared hard at her.

“Are we talking about power, here, or you?”

Jude took a moment before replying. Then she said, “Both.”

Gentle shrugged. “If that happens, you'll make your decision,” he said. “You've made them

before, and you've been wrong. Maybe it's time to have a little faith, Jude.” He stood up.

“Share what the rest of us already know,” he said.

“And what's that?”

“That in a few hours we'll be standing in a legendary place.”

Monday softly said, “Yeah,” and Gentle smiled.

“Take care down here, all of you,” he said, and headed to the door.

Jude reached for Clem, and with his help hauled herself to her feet. By the time she reached

the door Gentle was already on the stairs.

She didn't say his name. He simply stopped for a moment and, without turning, said, “I

don't want to hear.”

Then he continued his ascent, and she knew by the slope of his shoulders and the weight of

his tread that for all his prophetic talk there was a little worm of doubt in him just as there

was in her, and he was afraid that if he turned and saw her, it would fatten on their look and

choke him.

The scent of sap was waiting for him on the threshold, and as he'd hoped it masked the

sourer smell from the darkened streets outside. Otherwise his room, in which he'd lounged

and laughed and debated the conundrums of the cosmos, offered no solace. It suddenly

seemed to him a stagnant place, too well feited and swayed for its own good: the last place

on earth to perform his work. But then hadn't he berated Jude, just moments ago, for not

having sufficient faith? There was no great power in geography. It was all rooted in the

Maestro's faith in the miraculous, and in the will that sprang from that faith.

In preparation for the work ahead, he undressed. Once naked, he crossed to the

mantelpiece, intending to fetch the candles off it and set them around the circle. But the

sight of their flames in flickering array made him think instead of worship, and he dropped

to his knees in front of the empty grate to pray. The Lord's Prayer came most readily to his

lips, and he recited it aloud. Its sentiments had never been apter, of

course. But after tonight

it would be a museum piece, a relic of a time before the Lord's Kingdom had come and His

will been done, on Earth and in Heaven.

A touch on the back of his neck brought this recitation to a halt. He opened his eyes, raised

his head, turned. The room was empty, but his nape still tingled where the touch had come.

This wasn't memory, he knew. It was something more delicate than that, a reminder of the

other prize that lay at the end of this night's work. Not glory, not the gratitude of the

Dominions: Pie 'oh' pah. He looked up at the stained wall above the mantelpiece and seemed

for a moment to see the mystif's face there, changing with each flicker of the candlelight.

Athanasius had called the love he felt for the mystif profane. He hadn't believed it then, and

he didn't now. The purpose that was in him as Reconciler and the desire he felt for reunion

were part of the same plan.

The prayer was gone from his tongue. No matter, he thought; I'm its executor now. He got

up, took one of the candles from the mantelpiece, and, smiling, stepped over the perimeters

of the circle, not as a simple traveler but as a Maestro, ready to use its engine to miraculous

end.

Lying on the cushions in the lounge below, Jude felt the flow of energies start. They ached

in her chest and belly, like mild dyspepsia. She rubbed her stomach, in the hope of soothing

the discomfort, but it did little good, so she got to her feet and hobbled out, leaving Monday

to entertain HoiPolloi with his chatter and his handiwork. He'd taken to drawing on the

walls with the smoke from one of the candles, enhancing the marks with his chalks. Hoi —

Polloi was much impressed, and her laughter, the first Jude had ever heard from the girl,

followed her out into the hallway, where she found Clem standing guard beside the locked

front door.

They stared at each other in the candlelight for several seconds before she said, “Do you

feel it too?”

“Yep. It's not very pleasant, is it?”

“I thought it was only me,” she said.

“Why only you?”

“I don't know, some kind of punishment...”

“You still think he's got some secret agenda, don't you?”

“No,” Jude said, glancing up the stairs. “I think he's doing what he believes is best. In fact I

know it. Uma Umagammagi got inside his head—”

“God, he hated that.”

“She gave him a good report, whether he hated it or not.”

“So?”

“So there's still a conspiracy somewhere.”

“Sartori?”

“No. It's something to do with their Father and this damn Reconciliation.” She winced as

the discomfort in her belly became more severe. “I'm not afraid of Sartori. It's what's going

on in this house”—she gritted her teeth as another wave of pain passed through her

system—“that I can't quite trust.”

She looked back at Clem and knew that, as ever, he'd listen as a loving friend, but she could

expect no support from him. He and Tay were the angels of the Reconciliation, and if she

pressed them to decide between her welfare and that of the working, she'd be the loser.

The sound of Hoi—Polloi's laughter came again, not as feathery as before, but with an

undertow of mischief Jude knew was sexual. She turned her back on the sound and on Clem,

and her gaze came to rest on the door of the one room in this house she'd never entered. It

stood a little ajar, and she could see that candles were burning inside. Of all the company to

seek out when she was in need of comfort, Celestine's was the least promising, but all other

avenues were closed to her. She crossed to the door and pushed it open. The mattress was

empty, and the candle beside it was burning low. The room was too large to be illuminated

by such a fitful flame, and she had to study the darkness until she found its occupant.

Celestine was standing against the far wall.

"I'm surprised you came back," she said.

Jude had heard many exquisite speakers since she'd last heard Celestine, but there was

still something extraordinary in the way the woman mingled voices: one running beneath

the other, as though the part of her touched by divinity had never entirely married with a

baser self.

"Why surprised?"

"Because I thought you'd stay with the Goddesses."

"I was tempted," Jude replied.

"But finally you had to come back. For him."

"I was a messenger, that's all. I've got no claims on Gentle now."

"I didn't mean Gentle."

"I see."

"I meant—"

"I know who you meant."

"Can't you bear to have his name spoken?"

Celestine had been staring at the candle flame, but now she looked up at Jude.

"What will you do when he's dead?" she asked. "He will die, you realize that? He has to.

Gentle'll want to be magnanimous, the way victors are supposed to be; he'll want to

forgive all his brother's trespasses. But there'll be too many demands for his head."

Until now Jude hadn't contemplated the possibility of Sartori's demise.

Even in the tower,

knowing Gentle had gone in pursuit of his brother intending to stop his malice, she'd never

believed he'd die. But what Celestine said was undoubtedly true. There were countless

claims upon his head, both secular and divine. Even if Gentle was forgiving, Jokataytau

wouldn't be; nor would the Unbeheld.

"You're very alike, you know, you and he," Celestine said. "Both copies of a finer original."

"You never knew Quaisoir," Jude replied. "You don't know whether she was finer or not."

"Copies are always coarser. It's their nature. But at least your instinct's good. You and he

belong together. That's what you're pining for, isn't it? Why don't you admit it?"

"Why should I pour out my heart to you?"

"Isn't that what you came in here to do? You won't get any sympathy out there."

"Listening by the door now?"

"I've heard everything that's gone on in this house since I was brought here. And what I

haven't heard, I've felt. And what I haven't felt, I've predicted."

"Like what?"

"Well, for one thing that child Monday will end up coupling with the little virgin you

brought back from Yzordderrex."

"That scarcely takes an oracle."

"And the Oviata isn't long for this world."

“The Oviate?”

“It calls itself Little Ease. The beast you had under your heel. It asked the Maestro to bless

it a little while ago. It'll murder itself before daybreak.”

“Why would it do that?”

“It knows when Sartori perishes it'll be forfeit too, however much allegiance it's sworn to

the winning side. It's sensible. It wants to choose its moment.”

“Am I supposed to find some lesson in that?”

“I don't think you're capable of suicide,” Celestine said.

“You're right. I've got too much to live for.”

“Motherhood?”

“And the future. There's going to be a change in this city. I've seen it in Yzordderrex

already. The waters will rise—”

”—and the great sisterhood will dispense love from on high.”

“Why not? Clem told me what happened when the Goddess came. You were in ecstasies, so

don't try and deny it.”

“Maybe I was. But do you imagine that's going to make you and me sisters? What have we

got in common, besides our sex?”

The question was meant to sting, but its plainness made Jude see the questioner with fresh

eyes. Why was Celestine so eager to deny any other link between them but womanhood?

Because another such link existed, and it was at the very heart of their

enmity. Nor, now that

Celestine's contempt had freed Jude from reverence, was it difficult to see where their

stories intersected. From the beginning, Celestine had marked Jude out as a woman who

stank of coitus. Why? Because she too stank of coitus. And this business with the child,

which came up again and again: that had the same root. Celestine had also borne a baby for

this dynasty of Gods and demigods. She too had been used and had never quite come to

terms with the fact. When she raged against Jude, the tainted woman who would not

concede her error in being sexual, in being fecund, she was raging against some fault in

herself.

And the nature of that fault? It wasn't difficult to guess, or to put words to. Celestine had

asked a plain question. Now it was Jude's turn.

"Was it really rape?" she said.

Celestine glanced up, her look venomous. The denial that followed, however, was

measured. "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean," she said.

"Well, now," Jude replied, "how else can I put it?" She paused. "Did Sartori's Father take

you against your will?"

The other woman now put on a show of comprehension, followed by one of shock.

"Of course He did," she said. "How could you ask such a thing?"

“But you knew where you were going, didn't you? I realize Dowd drugged you at the start,

but you weren't in a coma all the way across the Dominions. You knew something

extraordinary was waiting at the end of the trip.”

“I don't—”

“Remember? Yes, you do. You remember every mile of it. And I don't think Dowd kept his

mouth shut all those weeks. He was pimping for God, and he was proud of it Wasn't he?”

Celestine offered no riposte. She simply stared at Jude, daring her to go on, which Jude was

happy to do.

“So he told you what lay ahead, didn't he? He said that you were going to the Holy City and

you were going to see the Unbeheld Himself. Not just see Him but be loved by Him. And you

were flattered,”

“It wasn't like that.”

“How was it then? Did He have His angels hold you down while He did the deed? No, I don't

think so. You lay there and you let Him do what the hell He wanted, because it was going to

make you into the bride of God and the mother of Christ—”

“Stop!”

“If I'm wrong, tell me how it was. Tell me you screamed and fought and tried to tear out

His eyes.”

Celestine continued to stare, but said nothing.

“That's why you despise me, isn't it?” Jude went on. “That's why I'm the woman who stinks

of coitus. Because I lay down with a piece of the same God that you did, and you don't like to

be reminded of the fact.”

“Don't judge me, woman!” Celestine suddenly shouted.

“Then don't you judge me! Woman. I did what I wanted with the man I wanted, and I'm

carrying the consequences. You did the same. I'm not ashamed of it. You are. That's why

we're not sisters, Celestine.”

She'd said her piece, and she wasn't much interested in a further round of insults and

denials, so she turned her back and had her hand on the door when Celestine spoke. The re

were no denials. She spoke softly, half lost to memory.

“It was a city of iniquities,” she said. “But how was I to know that? I thought I was blessed

among women, to have been chosen. To be God's—”

“Bride?” Jude said, turning back from the door.

“That's a kind word,” Celestine said. “Yes. Bride.” She drew a deep breath. “I never even

saw my husband.”

“What did you see?”

“Nobody. The city was full, I know it was full, I saw shadows at the window, I saw them

close up the doors when I passed, but nobody showed their faces.”

“Were you afraid?”

“No. It was too beautiful. The stones were full of light, and the houses were so high you

could barely see the sky. It was like nothing I'd ever seen. And I walked, and I walked, and I

kept thinking, He'll send an angel for me soon, and I'll be carried to His palace. But there

were no angels. There was just the city, going on and on in every direction, and I got tired

after a time. I sat down, just to rest for a few minutes, and I fell asleep.”

“You fell asleep?”

“Yes. Imagine! I was in the City of God, and I fell asleep. And I dreamed I was back at

Tyburn, where Dowd had found me. I was watching a man being hanged, and I dug through

the crowd until I was standing under the gallows.” She raised her head. “I remember looki ng

up at him, kicking at the end of his rope. His breeches were unbuttoned, and his rod was

poking out.”

The look on her face was all disgust, but she drove herself on to finish the story.

“And I lay down under him. I lay down in the dirt in front of all these people, with him

kicking, and his rod getting redder and redder. And as he died he spilled his seed. I wanted

to get up before it touched me, but my legs were open, and it was too late. Down it came. Not

much. Just a few spurts. But I felt every drop inside me like a little fire, and I wanted to cry

out. But I didn't, because that was when I heard the voice.” .

“What voice?”

“It was in the ground underneath me. Whispering.”

“What did it say?”

“The same thing, over and over again: Nisi Nirvana, Nisi Nirvana. Nisi... Nirvana.”

In the process of repeating the words, tears began to flow copiously. She made no attempt

to stem them, but the repetition faltered.

“Was it Hapexamendios talking to you?” Jude asked.

Celestine shook her head. “Why should He speak to me? He had what He needed. I’d lain

down and dreamed while He dropped His seed. He was already gone, back to His angels.”

“So who was it?”

“I don’t know. I’ve thought about it over and over. I even made it into a story, to tell the

child, so that when I’d gone he’d have the mystery for himself. But I don’t think I ever really

wanted to know. I was afraid my heart would burst if I ever knew the answer. I was afraid

the heart of the world would burst.”

She looked up at Jude.

“So now you know my shame,” she said.

“I know your story,” said Jude. “But I don’t see any reason for shame.”

Her own tears, which she’d been holding back since Celestine had begun to share this

horror with her, fell now, flowing a little for the pain she felt and a little for the doubt that

still churned in her, but mostly for the smile that came onto Celestine's face when she heard

Jude's reply, and for the sight of the other woman opening her arms and crossing the room,

to embrace her like a loved one who'd been lost and found again before some final fire.

If coming to the moment of Reconciliation had been for Gentle a series of rememberings,

leading him back to himself, then the greatest of those rememberings, and the one he was

least prepared for, was the Reconciliation itself.

Though he'd performed the working before, the circumstances had been radically

different. For one, there'd been all the hoopla of a grand event. He'd gone into the circle like

a prizefighter, with an air of congratulation hanging around his head before he 'd even

worked up a sweat, his patrons and admirers a cheering throng at the sidelines. This time he

was alone. For another, he'd had his eyes on what the world would shower on him when the

work was done: what women would fall to him, what wealth and glory would come. This

time, the prize in sight was a different thing entirely, and wouldn't be counted in stained

sheets and coinage. He was the instrument of a higher and wiser power.

That fact took the fear away. When he opened his mind to the pfocess, he felt a calm come

upon him, subduing the unease he'd felt climbing the stairs. He'd told Jude and Clem that

forces would run through the house the likes of which its bricks had never known, and it

was true. He felt them fuel his weakening mind, ushering his thoughts out of his head to

gather the Dominion to the circle.

That gleaning began with the place he was sitting in. His mind spread to all compass

points, and up and down, to have the sum of the room. It was an easy space to grasp.

Generations of prison poets had made the analogies for him, and he borrowed them freely.

The walls were his body's limits, the door his mouth, the windows his eyes: commonplace

similitudes, taxing his power of comparison not a jot. He dissolved the boards, the plaster,

the glass, and all the thousand tiny details in the same lyric of confinement and, having made

them part of him, broke their bounds to stray farther afield.

As his imagination headed down the stairs and up onto the roof, he felt the beginnings of

momentum. His intellect, dogged by literalism, was already lagging behind a sensibility more

mercurial, which was delivering back to him similitudes for the whole house before his

logical faculties had even reached the hallway.

Once again, his body was the measure of all things: the cellar, his bowels; the roof, his

scalp; the stairs, his spine. Their proofs delivered, his thoughts flew out of the house, rising

up over the slates and spreading through the streets. He gave passing consideration to

Sartori as he went, knowing his other was out here in the night somewhere, skulking.

But his mind was quicksilver, and too exhilarated by its speed and capacity to go searching

in the shadows for an enemy already defeated.

With speed came ease. The streets were no more difficult to claim than the house he'd

already devoured. His body had its conduits and its intersections, had its places of

excrement and its fine, dandified facades; had its rivers, moving from a springing place, and

its parliament, and its holy seat, The whole city, he began to see, could be analogized to his

flesh, bone, and blood. And why should that be so surprising? When an architect turned his

mind to the building of a city, where would he look for inspiration? To the flesh where he'd

lived since birth. It was the first model for any creator. It was a school and an eating house

and an abattoir and a church; it could be a prison and a brothel and Bedlam. There wasn't an

edifice in any street in London that hadn't begun somewhere in the private city of an

architect's anatomy, and all Gentle had to do was open his mind to that fact and the districts

were his, running back to swell the assembly in his head.

He flew north, through Highbury and Finsbury Park, to Palmer's Green and Cockfosters. He

went east with the river, past Greenwich, where the clock that marked the coming of

midnight stood, and on towards Tilbury. West took him through Marylebone and

Hammersmith, south through Lambeth and Streatham, where he'd first

met Pie 'oh' pah,

long ago.

But the names soon became irrelevant. Like the ground seen from a rising plane, the

particulars of a street or a district became part of another pattern, even more appetizing to

his ambitious spirit. He saw the Wash glittering to the east, and the Channel to the south,

becalmed on this humid night. Here was a fine new challenge. Was his body, which had

proved the equal of a city, also the measure of this vaster geography? Why not? Water

flowed by the same laws everywhere, whether the conduit was a groove in his brow or a rift

between the continents. And were his hands not like two countries, laid side by side in his

lap, their peninsulas almost touching, their landscapes scarred and grooved?

There was nothing outside his substance that was not mirrored within: no sea, no city, no

street, no roof, no room. He was in the Fifth, and the Fifth in him, gathering to be carried

into the Ana as a proof and a map and a poem, written in praise of all things being One..

In the other Dominions the same pursuit of similitude was under way.

From his circle on the Mount of Lipper Bayak, Tick Raw had already drawn into his net of

dissolution both the city of Patashoqua and the highway that ran from its gates towards the

mountains. In the Third, Scopique-his fears that the absence of the Pivot would invalidate

his working allayed— was spreading his grasp across the Kwem towards the dust bowls

around Maike”. In L'Himby, where he was soon to arrive, there were celebrants gathering at

the temples, their hopes raised by prophetics who'd appeared from hiding the night before

to spread the word that the Reconciliation was imminent.

No less inspired, Athanasius was presently traveling back along the Lenten Way to the

borders of the Third and skimming the ocean to the islands, while a self more tender trod

the changed streets of Yzordderrex. He found challenges there unknown to Scopique, Tick

Raw, or even Gentle. There were slippery wonders loose on the streets that defied easy

analogy. But in inviting Athanasius to join the Synod, Scopique had chosen better than he

knew. The man's obsession with Christos, the bleeding God, gave him a grasp of what the

Goddesses had wrought that a man less preoccupied by death and resurrection would never

have owned. In Yzordderrex's ravaged streets he saw a reflection of his own physical

ravagement. And in the music of the iconoclastic waters an echo of the blood that ran from

his wounds, transformed—by love of the Holy Mother he had worshiped—into a sublime

and healing liquor.

Only Chicka Jackeen, at the borders of the First Dominion, had to

work with abstractions,

for there was nothing of a physical nature he could win similitudes from. All he had was the

blank wall of the Erasure to set his mind on. Of the Dominion that lay beyond—which it fell

to him to encapsulate and carry into the Ana—he had no knowledge.

He hadn't spent so many years studying the mystery without finding some means to tussle

with it, however. Although his body offered no analogy for the enigma that lay on the other

side of the divide, there was a place in him just as sealed from sight, and just as open to the

inquiries made by dreaming explorers like himself. He let mind—the unbeheld process that

empowered every meaningful action, that made the very devotion that kept him in his

circle—be his similitude. The blank wall of the Erasure was the white bone of his skull,

scoured of every scrap of meat and hair. The force inside, incapable of impartial self-study,

was both the God of the First and the thoughts of Chicka Jackeen, bonded by mutual scrutiny.

After tonight, both would be free of the curse of invisibility. The Erasure would drop and

the Godhead come back into view to walk the Imajica. When that happened, when the same

Godhead who'd taken the Nullianacs into His furnace and burned their malice away, was no

longer divided from His Dominions, there would be a revelation such as had never been

known before. The dead, trapped in their condition and unable to find

the door, would have

a light to lead the way. And the living, no longer afraid to show their minds, would step from

their houses like divinities,, carrying their private heavens upon their heads for all to see.

About his own work, Gentle had little grasp of what his fellow Maestros were achieving,

but the absence of alarm from the other Dominions reassured him that all was well. All the

pains and humiliations he'd endured to reach this place had been repaid in the little hours

since he'd stepped into the circle. An ecstasy he'd only known for the duration of a heartbeat

suffused him, confounding the conviction he'd had that such feelings only came in glimpses

because to know them for longer would burst the heart. It wasn't so. The ecstasy went on

and on, and he was surviving it: more than surviving, burgeoning, his authority over the

working stronger with every city and sea he retrieved into the circle where he sat.

The Fifth was almost there with him now, sharing the space, teaching him with its coming

where the true power of a Reconciler lay. It wasn't a skill with feits and sways, nor was it

pneumas, nor resurrections, nor the driving out of demons. It was the strength to call the

myriad wonders of an entire Dominion by the names of his body and not be broken by the

simile; to allow that he was in the world to its smallest degree, and the world in him, and not

be driven to insanity by the intricacies he contained or else so enamored of the panoramas

he was spread through that he lost all memory of the man he'd been.

There was such pleasure in this process that laughter began to shake him as he sat in the

circle. His good humor wasn't a distraction from his purpose but instead made it easier still,

his laugh-lightened thoughts running from the circle out to regions both bright and

benighted and coming back with their prizes like runners sent with poems to a promised

land, and returning with it on their backs, flowering as it came.

In the room above, Little Ease heard the laughter and capered in sympathy with the

Liberatore's joy. What else could such a sound mean, but that the deed was close to being

done? Even if it didn't see the consequences of this triumph, it thought, its last night in the

living world had been immeasurably sweetened by all it had been a party to. And should

there be an afterlife for such creatures as itself (although of this it was by n o means certain),

then its account of this night would be a fine tale to tell when it went into the company of its

ancestors.

Anxious not to disturb the Reconciler, it gave up its dance of celebration and was about to

return to the window and its duties as night watchman when it heard a sound its paddings

had concealed. Its gaze went from the sill to the ceiling. The wind had got up in the last little

while and was skittering across the roof, rattling the slates as it went, or so Ease thought,

until it realized the tree outside was as still as the Kwem at equinox.

Little Ease didn't come from a tribe of heroes; quite the reverse. The legends of its people

concerned famous apologists, humblers, deserters, and cowards. Its instinct, hearing this

sound from above, was to be away downstairs as fast as its bandy legs knew how. But it

fought what came naturally, for the Reconciler's sake, and cautiously approached the

window in the hope of gaining a glimpse of what was happening above.

It climbed up onto the sill and, belly up, slid itself out a little way, peering up at the eaves.

A mist dirtied the starlight, and the roof was dark. It leaned a little farther out, the sill hard

beneath its bony back. From the window below, the sound of the Reconciler's laughter

floated up, its music reassuring. Little Ease had time to smile, hearing it. Then something as

dark as the roof and as dirty as the fog that covered the stars reached down and stopped its

mouth. The attack came so suddenly Little Ease lost its grip on the window frame and

toppled backwards, but its smotherer had too tight a hold on it to let it drop, and hauled it

up onto the roof. Seeing the assembly there, Ease knew its errors in— : stantly. One, it had

stopped its nostrils and so failed to smell this congregation. Two, it had believed too much in

a theology which taught that evil came from below. Not so, not so. : While it had watched the

street for Sartori and his legion, it ' ; had neglected the route along the roofs, which was just

as ; secure for creatures as nimble as these.

There were not more than six of them, but then there . ; didn't need to be. The gek-a-gek

were feared among the feared; Oviates that only the most overweening of Maestros would

have called into the Dominions. As massive as tigers, and as sleek, they had hands the size of

a man's head and heads as flat as a man's hand. Their flanks were translucent in some lights,

but here they had made a pact with darkness, and they lay—all but the smotherer—at the

apex of the roof, their silhouettes concealing the Maestro until he rose and murmured that

the captive be brought to his feet.

“Now, Little Ease,” he said, the words too soft to be heard in the rooms below, but loud

enough to make the creature evacuate its bowels in terror, “I want you to spill more than

your shite for me.”

It gave Sartori no satisfaction to watch Little Ease's life go out. The sense of exhilaration

he'd felt at dawn when, having summoned the gek-a-gek, he'd contemplated the

confrontation that lay a few hours off, had been all but sweated out of him by the heat of the

intervening day. The gek-a-gek were powerful beasts and might well have survived the

journey from Shiverick Square to Gamut Street, but no Oviate was fond of the light from any

heaven, and rather than risk their debilitation, he'd stayed beneath the trees with his pride,

counting off the hours. Only once had he ventured from their company and had found the

streets deserted. The sight should have heartened him. With the area deserted he and the

creatures would be unwitnessed when they moved on the enemy. But sitting in the silent

bower with his dozing legion, undistracted by even the sound of a fly, his mind had been

preyed upon by fears he'd always put away until now, fears fueled by the sight of these

empty streets.

Was it possible that his revisionist purposes were about to be overwhelmed by some still

greater revision? He realized his dreams of a New Yzordderrex were valueless. He'd said as

much to his brother in the tower. But even if he wasn't to be an empire builder here, he still

had something to live for. She was in the house in Gamut Street, yearning for him, he hoped,

as he yearned for her. He wanted continuance, even if it was as Hell to Gentle's Heaven. But

the desertion of this city made him wonder if even that was a pipe dream.

As the afternoon had crept on, he'd begun to look forward to reaching

Gamut Street,

simply for the signs of life it would provide. But he'd arrived to find precious little comfort

here. The phantoms that lingered at the perimeters only reminded him of how uncharitable

death really was, and the sounds that issued from the house itself (a girl's giggling from one

of the lower rooms, and later full-throated laughter, his brother's, from the Meditation

Room) only seemed to him signs of an idiot optimism.

He wished he could scour these thoughts from his head, but there was no escape from

them except, possibly, in the arms of his Judith. She was in the house, that he knew. But with

the currents unleashed inside so strong, he dared not enter. What he wanted, and what he

finally got from Little Ease, was intelligence as to her state and whereabouts. He'd assumed,

wrongly as it turned out, that Judith was with the Reconciler. She'd taken herself off to

Yzordderrex, Little Ease said, and come back with fabulous tales. But the Reconciler had not

been much impressed by them. There'd been a fracas, and he'd begun his working alone.

Why had she gone in the first place? he inquired, but the . creature claimed it didn't know

and could not be persuaded to supply an answer even though its limbs were half twisted off

and its brain pan opened to the gek-a-gek's tongue. It had died protesting its ignorance, and

Sartori had left the pride to toy with the carcass, taking himself off

along the roof to turn

over what he'd learned.

Oh, for a wad of kreauchee, to subdue his impatience, or else make him brave enough to

beat on the door and tell her to come out and make love among the phantoms. But he was

too tender to face the currents. There'd come a time, — very soon, when the Reconciler, his

gathering completed, would retire to the Ana. At that juncture the circle, its power no longer

needed as a conduit to carry the analogues back into its reservoir, would turn off those

currents and turn its attention to conveying the Reconciler through the In Ovo. There, in that

window between the Reconciler's removal to the Ana and the completion of the working, he

would act. He'd enter the house and let the gek-a-gek take Gentle (and any who rose to

protect him) while he claimed Judith.

Thinking of her, and of the kreauchee he yearned for, he brought the blue egg out of his

pocket and put it to his lips. He'd kissed its cool a thousand times in the last few hours;

licked it; sucked it. But he wanted it deeper inside him, locked up in his belly as she would

be when they'd mated again. He put it in his mouth, threw back his head, and swatlowed. It

went down easily, and granted him a few minutes of calm while he waited for the hour of his

deliverance.

Had Gem's head not had two tenants he might well have forsaken his place at the front

door during the hours in which the Reconciler worked above. The currents which that

process had unleashed had made his belly ache at the outset, but after a time their effect

mellowed, suffusing his system with a serenity so persuasive he'd wanted to find a place to

lie down and dream. But Tay had policed such dereliction of duty severely, and whenever

Clem's attention strayed he felt his lover's presence—which was so subtly wed and

interwoven with his thoughts it only became apparent when there was a conflict of

interests—rousing him to fresh vigilance. So he kept his post, though by now it was surely

an academic exercise.

The candle he had set beside the door was drowning in its own wax, and he had just

stooped to wick the lip and let the excess flow off when he heard something hitting the step

outside, the sound like that of a fish being slapped on a slab. He gave up his candle work and

put his ear to the door. There was no further sound. Had a fruit fallen from the tree outside

the house, he wondered, or was there some stranger rain tonight? He went from the door,

through to the room where Monday had been entertaining Hoi-Polloi. They'd left it for some

more private place, taking two of the cushions with them. The thought

that there were

lovers in the house tonight pleased him, and he silently wished them well as he crossed to

the window. It was darker outside than he'd expected, and though he had a view of the step

he couldn't distinguish between objects lying upon it and the designs that Monday had

drawn there.

Perplexed rather than anxious, he went back to the front door and listened again. There

were no further sounds, and he was tempted to let the matter alone. But he half hoped some

visionary rain had indeed begun to fall, and he was too curious to ignore the mystery. He

moved the candle from the door, the wax snuffing the flame as he did so. No matter. There

were other candles burning at the bottom of the stairs, and he had sufficient light to find the

bolts and slide them back.

In Celestine's room, Jude woke and raised her head from the mattress where she'd laid it

an hour before. The conversation between the women had continued for some while after

their peacemaking, but Jude's exhaustion had finally caught up with her, and Celestine had

suggested she rest for a while, which, reassured by Celestine's presence, she'd gladly done.

Now she stirred to find that Celestine had also succumbed, her head on the mattress, her

body on the floor. She was snoring softly, undisturbed by whatever had woken Jude.

The door was slightly ajar, and a perfume was coming through it, stirring a faint nausea in

Jude's system. She sat up and rubbed at the crick in her neck, then got to her feet. She'd

slipped off her shoes before she lay down, but rather than search for them in the darkened

room she went out into the hallway barefoot. The smell was much stronger now. It was

coming from the street outside, its route plain. The front door was open, and the angels

who'd been guarding it were gone.

Calling Clem's name, she crossed the hallway, her step slowing as she approached the open

door. The candles at the stairs were bright enough to shed some light upon the step. There

was something glistening there. She picked up her speed again, asking for the Goddesses to

be with her and with Clem. Don't let this be him, she murmured, seeing that it was tissue

glistening, and blood in a pool around it; please don't let this be him.

It wasn't. Now that she was almost at the threshold she saw the remnants of a face there

and knew it: Sartori's agent, Little Ease. Its eyes had been scooped out, and its mouth, which

had spewed pleas and flattery in such abundance, was tongueless. But there was no

doubting its identity. Only a creature of the In Ovo could still twitch as this did, refusing to

give up the semblance of life even if the fact of it had gone.

She looked beyond the trophy into the murk of the street, calling Clem's name again. There

was no answer at first. Then she heard him, his shout half smothered.
“Go back inside! For-

God's-sake, go back!”

“Clem?” She stepped out of the house, bringing new cries of alarm from the darkness.

“Don't! Don't!”

“I'm not going back without you,” she said, avoiding the

Oviate's head as she advanced.

She heard something let out a soft sound as she did so, like a creature growling with its

maw full of bees. “Who's there?” she said.

There was no reply at first, but she knew it would come if she waited, and whose voice it

would be when it did. She did not anticipate the nature of the reply, however, or its falling

note.

“It wasn't supposed to happen this way,” Sartori said.

“If you've hurt Clem—”

“I've no wish to hurt anybody.”

She knew that was a lie. But she also knew he'd do Clem no harm as long as he needed a

hostage.

“Let Clem go,” she said. “Will you come to me if I do?”

She left a decent pause before replying, so as not to seem too eager.

“Yes,” she said. “I'll

come.” “No, Judy!” Clem said. “Don't. He's not alone.” She could see that now, as her eyes

became more accustomed to the darkness. Sleek, ugly beasts prowled back and forth. One

was up on its back legs, sharpening its claws on the tree. Another was in the gutter, close

enough for her to see its innards through its translucent skin. Their ugliness didn't distress

her. Around the fringes of any drama such detritus was bound to accrue: scraps of discarded

characters, soiled costumes, cracked masks. They were irrelevancies, and her lover had

taken them for company because he felt a kinship with them. She pitied them. But him,

who'd been most high, she pitied more.

"I want to see Clem here on the step before I make a move," she said.

There was a pause, then Sartori said, "I'm going to trust you."

His words were followed by further sounds from the Oviates that paced in the murk, and

Jude saw two of them slope out of the shadows, with Clem between them, his arms in their

throats. They came close enough to the pavement for her to see the foam of appetite that

rose from their lips; then they literally spat their prisoner free. Clem fell face down on the

road, his hands and arms covered in their muck. She wanted to go to his aid there and then,

but though the captors had retreated, the tree gouger had turned and lowered its shovel

head, its eyes, black as a shark's, flickering back and forth in their bulbous sockets, hungry

to have the frail meat on the road. If she moved she feared it would pounce, so she kept her

place on the step while Clem hauled himself to his feet. His arms were blistered by the

Oviate's spittle, but he was otherwise intact.

"I'm all right, Judy," he murmured. "Go back inside."

She stayed put, however, waiting until he was up and staggering across the pavement

before she started down the steps.

"Go back!" he told her again.

She put her arms around him and whispered. "Clem. I don't want you to argue with this. Go

into the house and lock the door. I'm not coming with you."

He started to speak, but she hushed him.

"No argument, I said. I want to see him, Clem. I want to ... be with him. Now, please, if you

love me, go inside and close the door."

She felt reluctance in his every sinew, but he knew too much about the business of love,

especially love that defied orthodoxy, to attempt to reason with her.

"Just remember what he's done," he said, as he let her go.

"That's all part of it, Clem," she said, and slipped past him.

It was easy to leave the light behind. The ache which the currents had woken in her

marrow diminished with every yard she put between herself and the house, and the thought

of the embrace ahead quickened her step. This was what she wanted, and what he wanted

too. Though the first causes of this passion were gone—one to dust, one to divinity—she and

the man in the darkness were its embodiments and could not be denied each other.

She glanced back towards the house once only, to see that Clem was lingering on the step.

She didn't waste time trying to persuade him to go inside, but simply turned back to the

shadows.

"Where are you?" she said.

"Here," her lover replied, and stepped from the folds of his legion.

A single strand of luminescent matter came with him, fine enough to have been woven by

Oviate spiders, but clotted here and there with beads like pearls, which swelled and dropped

from the filaments, running down his arms and face and mottling the ground where he

walked. The light flattered him, but she was too hungry for the truth of his face to be

deceived, and piercing the glamour with her stare found him much reduced. The shining

dandy she'd first met in Klein's plastic garden had gone. Now his eyes were heavy with

despair, his mouth drawn down at the corners, his hair awry. Perhaps he'd always looked

like this, and he'd simply used some piffling sway to mask the fact, but she doubted it. He

was changed on the outside because something had changed within.

Though she stood before him defenseless, he made no move to touch her, but hung back

like a penitent in need of invitation before he approached the altar. She liked this new

fastidiousness.

"I didn't hurt the angels," he said softly.

"You shouldn't even have touched them."

"It wasn't supposed to happen like this," he said again.

"The gek-a-gek were clumsy. They dropped some meat from the roof."

"I saw."

"I was going to wait until the power subsided and come for you in style." He paused, then

asked, "Would you have let me take you?"

"Yes."

"I wasn't certain. I was a little afraid you'd reject me, and then I'd become cruel. You're my

sanity now. I can't go on without you,"

"You went on all those years in Yzordderrex."

"I had you there," he said, "only by a different name."

"And you were still cruel."

"Imagine how much cruder I would have been," he said, as if amazed at the possibility, "if I

hadn't had your face to mellow me."

"Is that all I am to you? A face?"

"You know better than that," he said, his voice dropping "to a whisper.

"Tell me," she said, inviting his affections.

He glanced back over his shoulder, towards the legion. If he spoke to them she didn't hear

it. They simply retreated, cowed by his glance. When they were gone,

he put his hands to her

face, his little fingers just beneath the line of her jaw, his thumbs laid lightly at the corners

of her mouth. Despite the heat that was still rising from the cooked asphalt, his skin was

chilly.

“One way or another,” he said, “we don't have very long, so I'll keep this simple. There's no

future for us now. Maybe there was yesterday, but tonight...”

“I thought you were going to build a New Yzordderrex.”

“I was. I have the perfect model for it, here.” His thumbs went from the corners of her

mouth to the middle of her lips and stroked them. “A city made in your image, built in place

of these miserable streets.”

“But now?”

“We don't have the time, love. My brother's about his work up there, and when he's

finished”—he sighed, his voice dropping lower still—“when he's finished—”

“What?” she said. There was something he wanted to share, but he was forbidding himself.

“I hear you went back to Yzordderrex,” he said.

She wanted to press him to complete his earlier explanation, but she knew better than to

push too hard, so she answered him, knowing his earlier doubts could surface again if she

was patient. Yes, she said, she had indeed been to Yzordderrex, and she'd found the palace

much changed. This sparked his interest.

“Who's taken it over? Not Rosengarten? No. The Dearthers. That damn priest Athanasius—

”

“None of those.”

“Who then?”

“Goddesses.”

The web of luminescence fluttered around his head, shaken by his distress.

“They were always there,” she told him. “Or at least one was, a Goddess called Uma

Umagammagi. Have you ever heard of Her?”

“Legends—”

“She was in the Pivot.”

“That's impossible,” he said. “The Pivot belongs to the Unbeheld. The whole of the Imajica

belongs to the Unbeheld.”

She'd never heard of a breath of subservience in him before, but she heard it now.

“Does He own us too?” she asked him.

“We may escape that,” he said. “But it'll be hard, love. He's the Father of us all. He expects

to be obeyed, even to the very end.” Again an aching pause, but this time a request on its

heels. “Will you embrace me?” he asked her.

She answered with her arms. His hands slid from her face and through her hair to clasp

behind her.

"I used to think it was a godlike thing to build cities," he murmured.
"And if I built one fine

enough it would stand forever, and so would I. But everything passes
away sooner or later,

doesn't it?"

She heard in his words a despair that was the inverse of Gentle's
visionary zeal, as though

in the time she'd known them they'd exchanged their lives. Gentle the
faithless lover had

become a dealer in heavens, while Sartori, the sometime maker of
hells, was here holding

out love as his last salvation.

"What is God's work," she asked him quietly, "if it's not the building of
cities?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Well... maybe it's none of our business," she said, pretending a lover's
indifference to

matters of moment. "We'll: forget about the Unbeheld. We've got each
other. We've got the

child. We can be together for as long as we like."

There was enough truth in these sentiments, enough hope in her that
this vision might

come true, that using it for manipulative purpose sickened her. But
having turned her: back

on the house and all it contained, she could hear in her lover's
whispers echoes of the same

doubts that had made her an outcast, and if she had to use the feelings
between them as a

way to finally solve the enigma, so be it. Her queasiness at her deceit

wasn't soothed by its

effectiveness. When Sartori let out a tiny sob, as he did now, she wanted to confess her

motives. But she fought the desire and let him suffer, hoping that he'd finally purge himself

of all he knew, — even though she suspected he'd never dared even shape these thoughts

before, much less speak them.

“There'll be no child,” he said, “no being together.”

“Why not?” she said, still striving to keep her tone optimistic. “We can leave now, if you

want. We can go anywhere and hide away.”

“There are no hiding places left,” he said.

“We'll find one.”

“No. There are none.”

He drew away from her. She was glad of his tears. They were a veil between his gaze and

her duplicity.

“I told the Reconciler I was my own destroyer,” he said. “I said I saw my works, and I

conspired against them. But then I asked myself, Whose eyes am I seeing with? And you

know what the answer is? My Father's eyes, Judith. My Father's eyes....”

Of all the voices to return into Jude's head as he spoke, it was Clara Leash's she heard. Man

the destroyer, willfully undoing the world. And what more perfect manhood was there than

the God of the First Dominion?

"If I see my works with these eyes and want to destroy them," Sartori murmured, "what

does He see? What does He want?"

"Reconciliation," she said.

"Yes. But why? It's not a beginning, Judith. It's the end. When the Imajica's whole, He'll

turn it into a wasteland."

She drew away from him. "How do you know?"

"I think I've always known."

"And you said nothing? All your talk about the future—"

"I didn't dare admit it to myself. I didn't want to believe I was anything but my own man.

You understand that. I've seen you fight to see with your own eyes. I did the same. I couldn't

admit He had any part of me, until now." "Why now?"

"Because I see you with my eyes. I love you with my heart. I love you, Judith, and that

means I'm free of Him. I can admit... what... I... know."

He dissolved in grief, but his hands kept hold of her as he shook.

"There's nowhere to hide, love," he said. "We've got a few minutes together, you and I: a

few sweet moments. Then it's over."

She heard everything he said, but her thoughts were as much with what was going on in

the house behind her. Despite all she'd heard from Uma Umagammagi, despite the zeal of the

Maestro, despite all the calamities that would come with her interference, the Reconciliation

had to be halted.

“We can still stop Him,” she said to Sartori.

“It's too late,” he replied. “Let Him have His victory. We can defy Him a better way. A purer

way.”

“How?”

“We can die together.”

“That's not defying Him. It's defeat.”

“I don't want to live with His presence in me. I want to lie down with you and die. It won't

hurt, love.”

He opened his jacket. There were two blades at his belt. They glittered by the light of the

floating threads, but his eyes glittered more dangerously still. His tears had dried. He looked

almost happy.

“It's the only way,” he said.

“I can't.”

“If you love me you will.”

She drew her arm from his grasp. “I want to live,” she said, backing away from him.

“Don't desert me,” he replied. There was warning in his voice as well as appeal. “Don't

leave me to my Father. Please. If you love me don't leave me to my Father. Judith!” .

He drew the knives out of his belt and came after her, offering the handle of one as he

came, like a merchant selling suicide. She swiped at the proffered

blade, and it went from his

grasp. As it flew she turned, hoping to the Goddess that Clem had left the door open. He had;

and lit every can—die he could find, to judge by the spill of light onto the step. She picked up

her pace, hearing Sartori's voice behind her as she went. He only spoke her name, but the

threat in it was unmistakable. She didn't reply—her flight from him was answer enough—

but when she reached the pavement she glanced back at him. He was picking up the dropped

knife, and rising.

Again he said, “Judith—”

But this time it was a warning of a different order. Off to her left a motion drew her glance.

One of the gek-a-gek, the sharpener, was coming at her, its flat head now wide as a manhole

and toothed to its gut.

Sartori yelled an order, but the thing was rogue and came on at her unchecked. She raced

for the step, and as she did so heard a whoop from the door, Monday was there, naked but

for his grimy underwear: in his hand, a homemade bludgeon, which he swung around his

head like a man possessed. She ducked beneath its sweep as she made the step. Clem was

behind him, ready to haul her in, but she turned to call Monday to retreat, in time to see the

gek-a-gek mounting the step in pursuit. Her defender didn't retreat, but brought the weapon

down in a whistling arc, striking the gek-a-gek's gaping head. The bludgeon shattered, but

the blow sheared off one of the beast's bulbous eyes. Though wounded, its mass was still

sufficient to carry it forward, and one of its freshly honed claws found Monday's back as he

turned to dodge it. The boy shrieked and might have fallen beneath the Oviate's attack if

Clem hadn't grabbed his arms and all but thrown him into the house.

The half-blinded beast was a yard from Jude's feet, its head thrown back as it raged in pain.

But it wasn't the maw she was watching. It was Sartori. He was once again walking towards

the house, a knife in each hand, and a gek-a-gek at each heel. His eyes were fixed on her.

They shone with sorrow.

"In!" Clem yelled, and she relinquished both sight and step to pitch herself back over the

threshold.

The one-eyed Oviate came after her as she did so, but Clem was fast. The heavy door swung

closed, and Hoi-Pot-loi was there to fling the bolts across, leaving the wounded beast and its

still more wounded master out in the darkness.

On the floor above, Gentle heard nothing of this. He had finally passed, via the circle's good

offices, through the In Ovo and into what Pie had called the Mansion of the Nexus, the Ana,

where he and the other Maestros would undertake the penultimate phase of the working.

The conventional life of the senses was redundant in this place, and for Gentle being here

was like a dream in which he was knowing but unknown, potent but unfixed. He didn't

mourn the body he'd left in Gamut Street. If he never inhabited it again it would be no loss,

he thought. He had a far finer condition here, like a figure in some exquisite equation that

could neither be removed nor reduced but was all it had to be—no more, no less—to change

the sum of things.

He knew the others were with him, and though he had no sight to see them with, his mind's

eye had never owned so vast a palette as it did now, nor had his invention ever been finer.

There was no need for cribbing and forgery here. He had earned with his metempsychosis

access to a visionary grasp he'd never dreamt of possessing, and his imagination brimmed

with correlatives for the company he kept.

He invented Tick Raw dressed in the motley he'd first seen the man wear in Vanaeph, but

fashioned now from the wonders of the Fourth. A suit of mountains, dusted in Jokalaylaurian

snow; a shirt of Patashoqua, belted by its walls; a shimmering halo of green and gold, casting

its light down on a face as busy as the highway. Scopique was a less gaudy sight, the gray

dust of the Kwem billowing around him like a shredded coat, its particles etching the glories

of the Third in its folds. The Cradle was there. So were the temples at L'Himby; so was the

Lenten Way. There was even a glimpse of the railroad track, the smoke of its locomotive

rising to add its murk to the storm.:

Then Athanasius, dressed in a clout of dirty cloth and carrying in his bleeding hands a

perfect representation of Yzordderrex, from the causeway to the desert, from the harbor to

Iipse, The ocean ran from his wounded flank, and the crown of thorns he wore was

blossoming, throwing petals of rainbow light down upon all he bore. Finally, there was

Chicka Jackeen, here in lightning, the way he'd looked two hundred midsummers before.

He'd been weeping, then, and waxen with fright. But now the storm was his possession, not

his scourge, and the arcs of fire that leapt between his fingers were a geometry, austere and

beautiful, that solved the mystery of the First, and in unveiling it made perfection the new

enigma.

Inventing them this way, Gentle wondered if they in turn were inventing him, or whether

his painter's hunger to see was an irrelevancy to them, and what they imagined, knowing he

was with them, was a body subtler than any sight. It would be better that way, he supposed,

and with time he'd learn to rise out of his literalisms, just as he'd shrug off the self that wore

his name. He had no attachment to this Gentle left, nor to the tale that

hung behind. It was

tragedy, that self; any self. It was a marriage made with loss, and had he not wanted one last

glimpse of Pie 'oh' pah, he might have prayed that his reward for Reconciliation would be

this state in perpetuity.

He knew that wasn't plausible, of course. The Ana's sanctuary existed for only a brief time,

and while it did so it had more ecumenical business than nurturing a single soul. The

Maestros had served their purpose in bringing the Dominions into this sacred space, and

would soon be redundant. They would return to their circles, leaving Dominion to meld with

Dominion, and in so doing drive the In Ovo back like a malignant sea. What would happen

then was a matter of conjecture. He doubted there'd be an instant of revelation—all the

nations of the Fifth waking to their unfettered state in the same moment. It would mos t

likely be slow, the work of years. Rumors at first, that bridges wreathed in fogs could be

found by those eager enough to look. Then the rumors becoming certainties, and the bridges

becoming causeways, and the fogs great clouds, until, in a generation or two, children were

born who knew without being taught that the species had five Dominions to explore and

would one day discover its own Godhood in its wanderings. But the time it took to reach that

blessed day was unimportant. The moment the first bridge, however

small, was forged, the

Imajica was whole; and at that moment every soul in the Dominion,
from cradle to deathbed,

would be healed in some tiny part and take their next breath lighter
for the fact.

Jude waited in the hall long enough to be sure that Monday wasn't
dead; then she headed

towards the stairs. The currents which had induced such discomforts
were no longer circling

in the system of the house: sure sign that some new phase of the
working—possibly its

last—was under way above. Clem joined her at the bottom of the
stairs, armed with another

two of Monday's homemade bludgeons.

“How many of these creatures are there out there?” he demanded.

“Maybe half a dozen.”

“You'll have to watch the back door then,” he said, thrusting one of
the weapons at Jude.

“You use it,” she said, 'pressing past him. “Keep them out for as long
as you can.”

“Where are you going?”

“To stop Gentle.”

“Stop him? In God's name, why?”

“Because Dowd was right. If he completes the Reconciliation we're
dead.”

He cast the bludgeons aside and took hold of her. “No, Judy,” he said.
“You know I can't let

you do that.”

It wasn't just Clem speaking, but Tay as well: two voices and a single utterance. It was

more distressing than anything she'd heard or seen outside, to have this command issue

from a face she loved. But she kept her calm.

"Let go of me," she said, reaching for the banister to haul herself up the stairs.

"He's twisted your mind, Judy," the angels said. "You don't know what you're doing."

"I know damn well," she said, and fought to wrest herself free.

But Clem's arms, despite their blistering, were unyielding. She looked for some help from

Monday, but he and Hoi-Polloi had their backs to the door, against which the gek-a-gek were

beating their massive limbs. Stout as the timbers were, they'd splinter soon. She had to get

to Gentle before the beasts got in, or it was all over.

And then, above the din of assault, came a voice she'd only heard raised once before.

"Let her go."

Celestine had emerged from her bedroom, draped in a sheet. The candlelight shook all

around her, but she was steady, her gaze mesmeric. The angels looked around at her, Clem's

hands still holding Jude fast.

"She wants to—"

"I know what she wants to do," Celestine said. "If you're our guardians, guard us now . Let

her go."

Jude felt doubt loosen the hold on her. She didn't give the angels time to change their mind,

but dragged herself free and started up the stairs again. Halfway up, she heard a shout and

glanced down to see both Hoi-Polloi and Monday thrown forward as the door's middle panel

broke and a prodigious limb reached through to snatch at the air.

"Go on!" Celestine yelled up to her, and Jude returned to her ascent as the woman stepped

onto the bottom stair to guard the way.

Though there was far less light above than below, the details of the physical world became

more insistent as she climbed. The flight beneath her bare feet was suddenly a wonderland

of grains and knotholes, its geography entrancing. Nor was it simply her sight that filled to

brimming. The banister beneath her hand was more alluring than silk; the scent of sap and

the taste of dust begged to be sniffed and savored. Defying these distractions, she fixed her

attention on the door ahead, holding her breath and removing her hand from the banister to

minimize the sources of sensation. Even so, she was assailed. The creaks of the stairs were

rich enough to be orchestrated. The shadows around the door had nuances to parade and

called for her devotion. But she had a rod at her back: the commotion from below. It was

getting louder all the time, and now—cutting through the shouts and roars—came the sound

of Sartori's voice.

“Where are you going, love?” he asked her. “You can't leave me. I won't let you. Look! Love?”

Look! I've brought the knives.”

She didn't turn to see, but closed her eyes and stopped her ears with her hands, stumbling

up the rest of the stairs blind and deaf. Only when her toes were no longer stubbed, and she

knew she was at the top, did she dare the sight again. The seductions began again, instantly.

Every nick in every nail of the door said, Stop and study me. The dust rising around her was

a constellation she could have lost herself in forever. She pitched herself through it, with her

gaze glued to the door handle, and clasped it so hard the discomfort canceled the beguilings

long enough for her to turn it and throw the door open. Behind her Sartori was calling again,

but this time his voice was slurred, as though he was distracted by profusion.

In front of her was his mirror image, naked at the center of the stones. He sat in the

universal posture of the meditator: legs crossed, eyes closed, hands laid palms out in his lap

to catch whatever blessings were bestowed. Though there was much in the room to call her

attention—mantelpiece, window, boards, and rafters—their sum of enticements, vast as it

was, could not compete with the glory of human nakedness, and this nakedness, that she'd

loved and lain beside, more than any other. Neither the blandishments

of the ., walls —their

stained plaster like a map of some unknown country—nor the
persuasions of the crushed

leaves at the ^ sill could distract her now. Her senses were fixed on the
: Reconciler, and she

crossed the room to him in a few short ; strides, calling his name as
she went.

He didn't move. Wherever his mind wandered, it was too far from this
place —or rather,

this place was too small a part of his arena—for him to be claimed by
any voices here,

however desperate. She halted at the edge of the circle. Though there
was nothing to suggest

that what lay inside was in flux, she'd seen the harm done to both
Dowd and his voider when

the bounds had been injudiciously breached. From down below she
heard Celestine raise a

cry of warning. There was no time for equivocation. What the circle
would do it would do,

and she'd have to take the consequences.

Steeling herself, she stepped over the perimeter. Instantly, the myriad
discomforts that

attended passage afflicted her—itches, pangs, and spasms—and for a
moment — she

thought the circle intended to dispatch her across the In Ovo. But the
work it was about had

overruled such functions, and the pains simply mounted and mounted,
driving her to her

knees in front of Gentle. Tears spilled from her knitted lids, and the
ripest curses from her

lips. The circle hadn't killed her, but another minute of its

persecutions and it might. She had

to be quick.

She forced open her streaming eyes and set her gaze on Gentle. Shouts hadn't roused him,

nor had curses, so she didn't waste her breath with more. Instead she seized his shoulders

and began to shake him. His muscles were lax, and he lolled in her grasp, but either her

touch or the fact of her trespass in this charmed circle won a response. He gasped as though

he'd been drawn up from some airless deep.

Now she began to talk.

“Gentle? Gentle! Open your eyes! Gentle. I said, Open your fucking eyes!”

She was causing him pain, she knew. The tempo and volume of his gasps increased, and his

face, which had been beatifically placid, was knotted with frowns and grimaces. She liked

the sight. He'd been so smug in his messianic mode. Now there had to be an end to that

complacency, and if it hurt a little it was his own damn fault for being too much his Father's

child.

“Can you hear me?” she yelled at him. “You've got to stop the working. Gentle! You've got

to stop it!”

His eyes started to flicker open.

“Good! Good!” she said, talking at his face like a school-marm trying to coax a delinquent

pupil.

“You can do it! You can open your eyes. Go on! Do it! If you won't, I'll do it for you, I'm

warning you!”

She was as good as her word, lifting her right hand to his left eye and thumbing back the

lid. His eyeball was rolled back into its socket. Wherever he was, it was still a long way off,

and she wasn't sure her body had the strength to resist its harrowment while she coaxed

him home.

Then, from the landing behind her, Sartori's voice.

“It's too late, love,” he said. “Can't you feel it? It's too late.”

She didn't need to look back at him. She could picture him well enough, with the knives in

his hands and elegy on his face. Nor did she reply. She needed every last ounce of will and

wit to stir the man in front of her.

And then inspiration! Her hand went from his face to his groin, from his eyelid to his

testicles. Surely there was enough of the old Gentle left in the Reconciler to value his

manhood. The flesh of his scrotum was loose in the warmth of the room. His balls were

heavy in her hand, heavy and vulnerable. She held them hard.

“Open your eyes,” she said, “or so help me I'm going to hurt you.”

He remained impassive. She tightened her grip. “Wake up,” she said.

Still nothing. She squeezed harder, then twisted. “Wake up!”

His breath quickened. She twisted again, and his eyes suddenly opened, his gasps

becoming a yell which didn't stop until there was no breath left in his lungs to loose it on. As

he inhaled his arms rose to take hold of Jude at the neck. She lost her grip on his balls, but it

didn't matter. He was awake and raging. He started to rise and, as he did so, p itched her out

of the circle. She landed clumsily, but began harassing him before she'd even raised her

head.

"You've got to stop the working!"

"Crazy .,. woman ..." he growled.

"I mean it! You've got to stop the working! It's all a plot!" She hauled herse lf up. "Dowd was

right, Gentle! It's got to be stopped,"

"You're not going to spoil it now," he said. "You're too late."

"Find a way!" she said. "There's got to be a way!"

"If you come near me again I'll kill you," he warned. He scanned the circle, to be c ertain it

was still intact. It was. "Where's Clem?" he yelled. "Clem?"

Only now did he look beyond Judith to the door, and beyond the door to the shadowy

figure on the landing. His frown deepened into a scowl of revulsion, and she knew any hope

of persuading him was lost. He saw conspiracy here.

"There, love," said Sartori. "Didn't I tell you it was too late?"

The two gek-a-gek fawned at his feet. The knives gleamed in his fists. This time he didn't

offer the handle of either one. He'd come to take her life if she refused to take her own.

"Dearest one," he said, "it's over."

He took a step and crossed the threshold.

"We can do it here," he said, looking down at her, "where we were made. What better

place?"

She didn't need to look back at Gentle to know he was hearing this. Was there some sliver

of hope in that fact?

Some persuasion that might drop from Sartori's lips and move Gentle where hers had

failed?

"I'm going to have to do it for us both, love," he said. "You're too weak. You can't see

clearly."

"I don't... want... to die," she said.

"You don't have any choice," he said. "It's either by the Father or the Son. That's all. Father

or Son."

Behind her, she heard Gentle murmur two syllables.

"Oh, Pie."

Then Sartori took a second step, out of the shadow into the candlelight. When he did, the

obsessive scrutiny of the room fixed him in every wretched morsel. His eyes were wet with

despair, his lips so dry they were dusty. His skull gleamed through his pallid skin, and his

teeth, in their array, made a fatal smile. He was Death, in every detail.
And if she recognized

that fact—she who loved him—then so, surely, did Gentle.

He took a third step toward her and raised the knives above his head.
She didn't look away,

but turned her face up towards him, daring him to spoil with his
blades what he'd caressed

with his fingers only minutes before.

"I would have died for you," he murmured. The blades were at the top
of their gleaming

arc, ready to fall. "Why wouldn't you die for me?"

He didn't wait for an answer, even if she'd had one to give, but let the
knives descend. As

they came for her eyes she looked away, but before they caught her
cheek and neck the

Reconciler howled behind her, and the whole room shook. She was
thrown from her knees,

Sartori's blades missing her by inches. The candles on the mantelpiece
guttered and went

out, but there were other lights to take their place. The stones of the
circle were flickering

like tiny bonfires flattened by a high wind, flecks of their brightness
racing from them to

strike the walls. At the circle's edge stood Gentle. In his hand, the
reason for this turmoil.

He'd picked up one of the stones, arming himself and breaking the
circle in the same

moment. He clearly knew the gravity of his deed. There was grief on
his face, so profound it

seemed to have incapacitated him. Having raised the stone he was now motionless, as if his

will to undo the working had already lost momentum.

She got to her feet, though the room was shaking more violently than ever. The boards felt

solid enough beneath ; her, but they'd darkened to near invisibility. She could see only the

nails that kept them in place; the rest, despite the light from the stones, was pitch black, and

as she started towards the circle she seemed to be treading a void.

There was a noise accompanying every tremor now: a , mingling of tortured wood and

cracking plaster, all underscored by a guttural boiling, the source of which she didn't

comprehend until she reached the edge of the circle. The darkness beneath them was indeed

a void—the In Ovo, opened by Gentle's breaking of the circle—and in it, al— , ready woken

by Sartori's dabblings, the prisoners that connived and supplicated there, rising at the scent

of escape.

At the door, the gek-a-gek set up a clamor of anticipation, sensing the release of their

fellows. But for all their power they'd have few of the spoils in the coming massacre. There

were forms appearing below that made them look kittenish: entities of such elaboration

neither Jude's eyes nor wits could encompass them. The sight terrified her, but if this was

the only way to halt the Reconciliation, then so be it. History would repeat itself, and the

Maestro be twice damned.

He'd seen the Oviates' ascent as clearly as she and was frozen by the sight. Determined to

prevent him from reestablishing the status quo at all costs, she reached to snatch the stone

from his hand, so as to pitch it through the window. But before her fingers could grasp it he

looked up at her. The anguish went from his face, and rage replaced it.

"Throw the stone away!" she yelled.

His eyes weren't on her, however. They were on a sight at her shoulder. Sartori! She threw

herself aside as the knives came down and, clutching the mantelpiece, turned back to see the

brothers face to face, one armed with blades, the other with the stone.

Sartori's glance had gone to Jude as she leapt, and before he could return it to his enemy

Gentle brought the stone down with a two-handed blow, striking sparks from one of the

blades as he dashed it from his brother's fingers. While the advantage was his, Gentle went

after the second blade, but Sartori had it out of range before the stone could connect, so

Gentle swung at the empty hand, the cracking of his brother's bones audible through the din

of Oviates and boards and cracking walls.

Sartori made a pitiful yell and raised his fractured hand in front of his brother, as if to win

remorse for the hurt. But as Gentle's eyes went to Sartori's broken hand, the other, whole

and sharp, came at his flank. He glimpsed the blade and half turned to avoid it, but it found

his arm, opening it to the bone from wrist to elbow. He dropped the stone, a rain of blood

coming after, and as his palm went up to stem the flow Sartori entered the circle, slashing

back and forth as he came.

Defenseless, Gentle retreated before the blade and, arching back to avoid the cuts, lost his

footing and went down beneath his attacker. One stab would have finished him there and

then. But Sartori wanted intimacy. He straddled his brother's body and squatted down up on

it, slashing at Gentle's arms as he attempted to ward off the coup de grace.

Jude scoured the unsolid boards for the fallen knife, her gaze distracted by the malignant

forms that were everywhere turning their faces to freedom. The blade, if she could find it,

would be of no use against them, but it might still dispatch Sartori. He'd planned to take his

own life with one of these knives. She could still turn it to such work, if she could only find

it.

But before she could do so, she heard a sob from the circle and, glancing back, saw Gentle

sprawled beneath his brother's weight, horrendously wounded, his chest sliced open, his

jaw, cheeks, and temples slashed, his hands and arms crisscrossed with cuts. The sob wasn't

his, but Sartori's.. He'd raised the knife and was uttering this last cry

before he plunged the
blade into his brother's heart.

His grief was premature. As the knife came down, Gentle found the
strength to thrash one

final time, and instead of finding his heart the blade entered his upper
chest below his

clavicle. Slickened, the handle slipped through Sartori's fingers. But he
had no need to

reclaim it. Gentle's rally was over as suddenly as it had begun. His
body uncurled, its spasms

ceased, and he lay still.

Sartori rose from his seat on his brother's belly and looked down at
the body for a time,

then turned to survey the spectacle of the void. Though the Oviates
were close to the surface

now, he didn't hurry to act or retreat, but surveyed the whole
panorama at the center of

which he stood, his eyes finally coming to rest on Jude.

"Oh, love," he said softly. "Look what you've done. You've given me to
my Heavenly

Father."

Then he stooped and reached out of the circle to take hold of the stone
that Gentle had

removed and, with the finesse of a painter laying down a final stroke,
put it back in place.

The status quo wasn't instantly restored. The forms below continued to
rise, seething with

frustration as they sensed that their route into the Fifth had been
sealed. The fire in the

stone began to go out, but before their last gutterings Sartori murmured an order to the gek-

a-gek and they sloped from their places at the door, their flat heads skimming the ground.

Jude thought at first they were coming for her, but it was Gentle they'd been ordered to

collect. They divided around the circle and reached over its perimeter, taking hold of the

body almost tenderly and lifting it out of their Maestro's way.

"Down the stairs," he told them, and they retreated to the door with their burden, leaving

the circle in Sartori's sole possession.

A terrible calm had descended. The last glimpses of the In Ovo had disappeared; the light

in the stones was all but gone. In the gathering darkness she saw Sartori find his place at the

center of the circle and sit.

"Don't do this," she murmured to him.

He raised his head and made a little grunt, as though he was surprised she was still in the

room.

"It's already done," he said. "All I have to do is hold the circle till midnight."

She heard a moan from below, as Clem saw what the Oviates had brought to the top of the

stairs. Then came the thump, thump, thump as the body was thrown down the flight. There

could only be seconds before they came back for her, seconds to coax him from the circle.

She knew only one way, and if it failed there could be no further

appeal.

“I love you,” she said.

It was too dark to see him, but she felt his eyes.

“I know,” he said, without feeling. “But my Heavenly Father will love me more. It’s in His

hands now.”

She heard the Oviates moving behind her, their breaths chilly on her neck.

“I don’t ever want to see you again,” Sartori said.

“Please call them off,” she begged him, remembering the way Clem had been apprehended

by these beasts, his arms half swallowed.

“Leave of your volition, and they won’t touch you,” he said. “I am about my Father’s

business.”

“He doesn’t love you....”

“Leave.”

“He’s incapable....”

“Leave,”

She got to her feet. There was nothing left to say or do. As she turned her back on the circle

the Oviates pressed their cold flanks against her legs and kept her trapped between them

until she reached the threshold, to be certain she made no last attempt on their summoner’s

life. Then she was allowed to go unescorted onto the landing. Clem was halfway up the

stairs, bludgeon in hand, but she instructed him to stay where he was,

fearful that the gek-a-

gek would claw him to shreds if he climbed another step.

The door to the Meditation Room slammed behind her, and she glanced back to confirm

what she'd already guessed: that the Oviates had followed her out and were now standing

guard at the threshold. Still nervous that they'd land some last blow, she crossed to the top

of the flight as though she were walking on eggs and only picked up her speed once she was

on the stairs.

There was light below, but the scene it illuminated was as grim as anything above. Gentle

was lying at the bottom of the stairs, his head laid on Celestine's lap. The sheet she'd worn

had fallen from her shoulders, and her breasts were bare, bloodied where she'd held her

son's face to her skin.

"Is he dead?" Jude murmured to Clem.

He shook his head. "He's holding on."

She didn't have to ask what for. The front door was open, hanging half demolished from its

hinges, and through it she could hear the first stroke of midnight from a distant steeple.

"The circle's complete," she said.

"What circle?" Clem asked her.

She didn't reply. What did it matter now? But Celestine had looked up from her meditation

on Gentle's face, and the same question was in her eyes as on Clem's lips, so Jude answered

them as plainly as she could.

“The Imajica's a circle,” she said.

“How do you know?” Clem asked.

“The Goddesses told me.”

She was almost at the bottom of the stairs, and now that she was closer to mother and son

she could see that Gentle was literally holding on to life, clutching at Celestine's arm and

staring up into her face. Only when Jude sank down onto the bottom stair did Gentle's eyes

go to her.

“I... never knew,” he said.

“I know,” she replied, thinking he was speaking of Hapexamendios' plot. “I didn't want to

believe it either.”

Gentle shook his head. “I mean the circle,” he said. “I never knew it was a circle....”

“It was the Goddesses' secret,” Jude said.

Now Celestine spoke, her voice as soft as the flames that lit her lips. “Doesn 't

Hapexamendios know?”

Jude shook her head.

“So whatever fire he sends,” Celestine murmured, “will burn its way around the circle.”

Jude studied her face, knowing there was some profit in this knowledge but too exhausted

to make sense of it. Celestine looked down at Gentle's face.

“Child?” she said.

“Yes, Mama.”

“Go to Him,” she said. “Take your spirit into the First and find your Father.”

The effort of breathing seemed almost too much for Gentle, never mind a journey. But what

his body was incapable of, maybe his spirit could achieve. He lifted his fingers towards his

mother's face. She caught hold of them.

“What are you going to do?” Gentle said.

“Call His fire,” Celestine said.

Jude looked towards Clem to see if this exchange made any more sense to him than it did

to her, but he looked completely perplexed. What was the use of inviting death when it was

going to come anyway, and all too quickly?

“Delay Him,” Celestine was telling Gentle. “Go to Him as a loving son, and hold His

attention for as long as you can. Flatter Him. Tell Him how much you want to see His face.

Can you do that for me?”

“Of course, Mama.”

“Good.”

Content that her child would do as he was charged, Celestine laid Gentle's hand back upon

his chest, and slid her knees out from beneath his head, lowering it tenderly to the boards.

She had one last instruction for him.

“When you go into the First, go through the Dominions. He mustn't know that there's

another way, do you understand?”

“Yes, Mama.”

“And when you get there, child, listen for the voice. It's in the ground. You'll hear it, if you

listen carefully. It says—”

“Nisi Nirvana.”

“That's right.”

“I remember,” Gentle said. “Nisi Nirvana.”

As if the name were a blessing and would protect him as he went on his way, he closed his

eyes and took his leave.

Celestine didn't indulge in sentiment but rose, pulling the sheet up around her as she

crossed to the bottom of the stairs. “Now I have to speak to Sartori.”

“That's going to be difficult,” Jude said. “The door's locked and guarded.”

“He's my son,” Celestine replied, looking up the flight. “He'll open it for me.”

And so saying, she ascended.

Gentle's spirit went from the house, thinking not of the Father that awaited him in the First

Dominion but of the mother he was leaving behind. In the hours since his return from the

Tabula Rasa's tower they'd shared all too brief a time together. He'd knelt beside her bed for

a few minutes while she told the story of Nisi Nirvana. He'd held on to her in the Goddesses'

rain, ashamed of the desire he felt but unable to deny it. And finally, moments ago, he'd lain

in her arms while the blood seeped out of him. Child; lover; cadaver. There was the arc of a

little life there, and they'd have to be content with it.

He didn't entirely comprehend her purpose in sending him from her, but he was too

confounded to do anything but obey. She had her reasons, and he had to trust them, now

that the work he'd labored to achieve had soured. That too he didn't entirely comprehend. It

had happened too fast. One moment he'd been so remote from his body he was almost ready

to forget it entirely; the next he was back in the Meditation Room, with Jude's grip earning

his screams, and his brother mounting the stairs behind her, his knives gleaming. He'd

known then, seeing death in his brother's face, why the mystif had torn itself to shreds in

order to make him seek Sartori out. Their Father was there in that face, in that despairing

certainly, and had been all along, no doubt. But he'd never seen it. All he'd ever seen was his

own beauty, twisted out of true, and told himself how fine it was to be Heaven to his other's

Hell. What a mockery that was! He'd been his Father's dupe—His agent, His fool— and he

might never have realized it if Jude hadn't dragged him raw from the Ana and showed him in

terrible particulars the destroyer in the mirror.

But the recognition had come so late, and he was so ill equipped to undo the damage he'd

done. He could only hope that his mother understood better than he where the little hope

left to them lay. In pursuit of it, he'd be her agent now and go into the First to do whatever

he could at her behest.

He went the long way round, as she'd instructed, his path taking him back over the

territories he'd traveled when he'd sought out the Synod, and though he longed to swoop

out of the air and pass the time of a new day with the others, he knew he couldn't linger.

He glimpsed them as he went, however, and saw that they'd survived the last hectic

minutes in the Ana and were back in their Dominions, beaming with their triumph. On the

Mount of Lipper Bayak, Tick Raw was howling to the heavens like a lunatic, waking every

sleeper in Vanaeph and stirring the guards in the watchtowers of Patashoqua. In the Kwem,

Scopique was clambering up the slope of the Pivot pit where he'd sat

to do his part, tears of

joy in his eyes as he turned them skyward. In Yzordderrex, Athanasius was on his knees in

the street outside the Eurhetemec Kesparate, bathing his hands in a spring that was leaping

up at his wounded face like a dog that wanted to lick him well. And on the borders of the

First, where Gentle's spirit slowed, Chicka Jackeen was watching the Erasure, waiting for the

blank wall to dissolve and give him a glimpse of Hapexa-mendios' Dominion.

His gaze left the sight, however, when he felt Gentle's presence. "Maestro?" he said.

More than any of the others, Gentle wanted to share something of what was afoot with

Jackeen, but he dared not. Any exchange this close to the Erasure might be monitored by the

God behind it, and he knew he'd not be able to converse with this man, who'd shown him

such devotion, without offering some word of warning, so he didn't tempt himself. Instead

he commanded his spirit on, hearing Jackeen call his name again as he went. But before the

appeal could come a third time he passed through the Erasure and into the Dominion

beyond. In the blind moments before the First appeared, his mother's voice echoed in his

head.

"She went into a city of iniquities," he heard her saying, "where no ghost was holy, and no

flesh was whole.”

Then the Erasure was behind him, and he was hovering on the
perimeters of the City of

God.

No wonder his brother had been an architect, he thought. Here was
enough inspiration for

a nation of prodigies, a labor of ages, raised by a power for whom an
age was the measure of

a breath. Its majesty spread in every direction but the one behind, the
streets wider than the

Patashoquan Highway and so straight they only disappeared at their
vanishing point, the

buildings so monumental the sky was barely visible between their
eaves. But whatever suns

or satellites hung in the heavens of this Dominion, the city had no
need of their illumination.

Cords of light ran through the paving stones, and through the bricks
and slabs of the great

houses, their ubiquity ensuring that all but the most vapid shadows
were banished from the

streets and plazas.

He moved slowly at first, expecting soon to encounter one of the city's
inhabitants, but

after passing over half a dozen intersections and finding no soul on the
streets, he began to

pick up his speed, slowing only when he glimpsed some sign of life
behind the facades. He

wasn't nimble enough to catch a face, nor was he so presumptuous as
to enter uninvited, but

he several times saw curtains moving, as though some shy but curious
citizen was retiring

from the sill before he could return the scrutiny. Nor was this the only sign of such

presences. Carpets left hanging over balustrades still shook, as if their beaters had just

retired from their patios; vines dropped their leaves down as fruit gatherers fled for the

safety of their rooms.

It seemed that however fast he traveled—and he was moving faster than any vehicle—he

couldn't overtake the rumor that drove the populace into hiding. They left nothing behind:

no pet, no child, no scrap of litter, no stroke of graffiti. Each was a model citizen and kept his

or her life out of sight behind the drapes and the closed doors.

Such emptiness in a metropolis so" clearly built to teem might have seemed melancholy

had it not been for the structures themselves, which were built of materials so diverse in

texture and color, and were lent such vitality by the light that ran in them, that, even though

they were deserted, the streets and plazas had a life of their own. The builders had banished

gray and brown from their palette and in its place had found slate, stone, paving, and tiles of

every conceivable hue and nuance, mingling their colors with an audacity no architect of the

Fifth would have dared. Street after street presented a spectacle of glorious color: facades of

lilac and amber, colonnades of brilliant purples, squares laid out in ocher and blue. And

everywhere, amid the riot, scarlet of eye-pricking intensity; and a

white as perfect; and here

and there, used more sparingly still, flicks and snippets of black: a tile,
a brick, a seam in a

slab.

But even such beauty could pall, and after a thousand such streets had
slipped by—all as

heroically built, all as lushly colored—the sheer excess of it became
sickening, and Gentle

was glad of the lightning that he saw erupt from one of the nearby
streets, its brilliance

sufficient to bleach the color from the facades for a flickering time. In
search of its source, he

redirected himself and came into a square, at the center of which
stood a solitary figure, a

Nullianac, its head thrown back as it unleashed its silent bolts into the
barely glimpsed sky.

Its power was many orders of magnitude greater than anything Gentle
had witnessed from

its like before. It, and presumably its brothers, had a piece of the God's
power between the

palms of its face, and its capacity for destruction was now stupendous.

Sensing the approach of the wanderer, the creature left off its
rehearsals and floated up

from the square as it searched for this interloper. Gentle didn't know
what harm it could do

to him in his present condition. If the Nullianacs were now
Hapexamendios' elite, who knew

what authority they'd been lent? But there was no profit in retreat. If
he didn't seek some

direction, he might wander here forever and never find his Father.

The Nullianac was naked, but there was neither sensuality nor vulnerability in that state.

Its flesh was almost as bright as its fire, its form without visible means of procreation or

evacuation: without hair, without nipples, without navel. It turned and turned and turned

again, looking for the entity whose nearness it sensed, but perhaps the new scale of its

destructive powers had made it insensitive, because it failed to find Gentle until his spirit

hovered a few yards away.

“Are you looking for me?” he said.

It found him now. Arcs of energy played back and forth between the palms of its head, and

out of their cracklings the creature's unmelodious voice emerged.

“Maestro,” it said.

“You know who I am?”

“Of course,” it said. “Of course.”

Its head wove like that of a mesmerized snake as it drew closer to Gentle.

“Why are you here?” it said.

“To see my Father.”

“Ah.”

“I came here to honor Him.”

“So do we all.”

“I'm sure. Can you take me to Him?”

“He's everywhere,” the Nullianac said. “This is His city, and He's in its

every mote.”

“So if I speak to the ground I speak to Him, do I?”

The Nullianac mused on this for a few moments. “Not the ground,” it said. “Don't speak to

the ground.”

“Then what? The walls? The sky? You? Is my Father in you?”

The arcs in the Nullianac's head grew more excitable. “No,” it said. “I wouldn't presume —”

“Then will you take me to where I can do Him devotion? There isn't much time.”

It was this remark more than any other which gained the Nullianac's compliance. It nodded

its death-laden head.

“I'll take you,” it said, and rose a little higher, turning from Gentle as it did so. “But as you

say, we must be swift. His business cannot wait long.”

Though Jude had been loath to let Celestine climb the stairs above, knowing as she did

what lay at the top, she also knew that her presence would only spoil what little chance the

woman had of gaining access to the Meditation Room, so she reluctantly stayed below,

listening hard—as did they all—for some clue to what was transpiring in the shadows of the

landing.

The first sound they heard was the warning growls of the gek-a-gek, followed by Sartori's

voice, telling trespassers that their lives would be forfeit if they attempted to enter.

Celestine answered him, but in a voice so low the sense of what she said was lost before it

reached the bottom of the flight, and as the minutes passed—were they minutes? perhaps

only dreadful seconds, waiting for another eruption of violence—Jude could resist the

temptation no longer and, snuffing out the candles closest to her, started a slow ascent.

She expected the angels to make some move to stop her, but they were too preoccupied

with tending to Gentle's body, and she climbed unhindered by all but her caution. Celestine

was still outside the door, she saw, but the Oviates were no longer blocking her way. At the

instruction of the man inside they'd shrunk away and were waiting, bellies to the ground, for

a cue to do mischief. Jude was now almost halfway up the flight, and she was able to catch

fragments of the exchange that was under way between mother and son. It was Sartori's

voice she heard first; a wasted whisper.

“It's over, Mama....”

“I know, child,” Celestine said. There was conciliation in her tone, not rebuke.

“He's going to kill everything....”

“Yes. I know that too.”

“I had to hold the circle for Him . . . it's what He wanted.”

“And you had to do what He wanted. I understand that, child. Believe me, I do. I served

Him too, remember? It's no great crime."

At these words of forgiveness, the door of the Meditation Room clicked open and slowly

swung wide. Jude was too far down the staircase to see more than the rafters, lit either by a

candle or the halo of Oviat tissue that had attended on Sartori when he was out in the

street. With the door open, his voice was much clearer.

"Will you come in?" he asked Celestine.

"Do you want me to?"

"Yes, Mama. Please. I'd like us to be together when the end comes."

A familiar sentiment, Jude thought. Apparently he didn't much care what breast he laid his

sobbing head on, as long as he wasn't left to die alone. Celestine put up no further show of

ambivalence but accepted her child's invitation and stepped inside. The door didn't close,

nor did the gek-a-gek creep back into place to block it. Celestine was quickly gone from

sight, however. Jude was sorely tempted to continue her ascent and watch what unfolded

inside, but she was afraid that any further advance would be sensed by the Oviates, so she

gingerly sat down on the stairs, halfway between the Maestro at the top and the body at the

bottom. There she waited, listening to the silence of the house; of the street; of the world.

In her mind, she shaped a prayer.

Goddess, she thought, this is Your sister, Judith. There's a fire coming, Goddess. It's almost

upon me, and I'm afraid.

From above, she heard Sartori speak, his voice now so low she could catch none of his

words even with the door open. But she heard the tears that they became, and the sound

broke her concentration. The thread of her prayer was lost. No matter. She'd said enough to

summarize her feelings.

The fire's almost upon me, Goddess. I am afraid.

What was there left to say?

The speed at which Gentle and the Nullianac traveled didn't diminish the scale of the city

they were passing through: quite the opposite. As the minutes passed, and the streets

continued to flicker by, thousand upon thousand, their buildings all raised from the same

riply colored stone, all built to obscure the sky, all laid to the horizon, the magnitude of this

labor began to seem not epic but insane. However alluring its colors were, however

satisfying its geometries and exquisite its details, the city was the work of a collective

madness: a compulsive vision that had refused to be placated until it had covered every inch

of the Dominion with monuments to its own relentlessness. Nor was there any sign of any

life on any street, leading Gentle to a suspicion that he finally voiced, not as a statement but

as a question.

"Who lives here?" he said.

“Hapexamendios.”

“And who else?”

“It's His city,” the Nullianac said,

“Are there no citizens?”

“It's His city.”

The answer was plain enough: the place was deserted. The shaking of vines and drapes

he'd seen when he'd first arrived had either been caused by his approach or, more likely,

been a game of illusion the empty buildings had devised to while away the centuries.

But at last, after traveling through innumerable streets that were indistinguishable from

each other, there were finally subtle signs of change in the structures ahead. Their luscious

colors were steadily deepening, the stone so drenched it must soon surely ooze and run. And

there was a new elaboration in the fagades, and a perfection in their proportions, that made

Gentle think that he and the Nullianac were approaching the First Cause, the district of

which the streets they'd passed through had been imitations, diluted by repetition.

Confirming his suspicion that the journey was nearing its end, Gentle's guide spoke.

“He knew you'd come,” it said. “He sent some of my brothers to the perimeter to look for

you.”

“Are there many of you?”

“Many,” the Nulh'anac said. “Minus one.” It looked in Gentle's direction, “But you know

this, of course. You killed him.”

“He would have killed me if I hadn't.”

“And wouldn't that have been a proud boast for our, tribe,” it said, “to have killed the Son

of God?”

It made a laugh from its lightning, though there was more humor in a death rattle.

“Aren't you afraid?” Gentle asked it,

“Why should I be afraid?”

“Talking this way when my Father may hear you?”

“He needs my service,” came the reply. “And I do not need to live.” It paused, then said,

“Though I would miss burning the Dominions.”

Now it was Gentle's turn to ask why.

“Because it's what I was born to do. I've lived too long, waiting for this.”

“How long?”

“Many thousands of years, Maestro. Many, many thousands.”:

It silenced Gentle, to think that he was traveling beside an entity whose span was so much

vaster than his own, and anticipated this imminent destruction as its life's reward. How far

off was that prize? he wondered. His sense of time was impoverished without the tick of

breath and heartbeat . to aid it, and he had no clue as to whether he'd

vacated his body in

Gamut Street two minutes before, or five, or ten. It was in truth academic. With the

Dominions reconciled, Hapexamendios could choose His moment, and Gentle's only comfort

was the continued presence of his guide, who would be, he suspected, gone from his side at

the first call to arms.

As the street ahead grew denser, the Nullianac's speed and height dropped, until they were

hovering inches above the ground, the buildings around them grotesquely elaborate now,

every fraction of their brick and stonework etched and carved and filigreed. There was no

beauty in these intricacies, only obsession. Their surfeit was more morbid than lively, like

the ceaseless, witless motion of maggots. And the same decadence had overcome the colors,

the delicacy and profusion of which he'd so admired in the suburbs. Their nuances were

gone. Every color now competed with scarlet, the mingled show not brightening the air but

bruising it. Nor was there light here in the same abundance as there'd been at the outskirts

of the city. Though seams of brightness still flickered in the stone, the elaboration that

surrounded them devoured their glow and left these depths dismal.

"I can go no farther than this, Reconciler," the Nullianac said. "From here, you go alone."

"Shall I tell my Father who found me?" Gentle said, hoping that the offer might coax a few

more tidbits from the creature before he came into Hapexamendios' presence.

"I have no name," the Nullianac replied. "I am my brother and my brother is me."

"I see. That's a pity."

"But you offered me a kindness, Reconciler. Let me offer you one."

"Yes?"

"Name me a place to destroy in your name, and I'll make it my business to do so: a city, a

country, whatever."

"Why would I want that?" Gentle said.

"Because you're your Father's son," came the reply. "And what your Father wants, so will

you."

Despite all his caution, Gentle couldn't help but give the destroyer a sour look.

"No?" it said.

"No."

"Then we're both without gifts to give," it said and, turning its back, rose and went from

Gentle without another word.

He didn't call after it for directions. There was only one way to go now, and that was on,

into the heart of the metropolis, choked though it was by gaud and elaboration. He had the

power to go at the speed of thought, of course, but he wished to do nothing that might alarm

the Unbeheld, so took his spirit into the garish gloom like a

pedestrian, wan dering between

edifices so fraught with ornament they could not be far from collapse.

As the splendors of the suburbs had given way to decadence, so
decadence had, in its turn,

given way to pathology, a state that drove his sensibilities beyond
distaste or antipathy to

the borders of panic. That mere excess might squeeze such anguish
out of him was

revelation in itself. When had he become so rarefied? He, the crass
copyist. He, the sybarite

who'd never said enough, much less too much. What had he become?
A phantom aesthete

driven to terror by the sight of his Father's city.

Of the Architect Himself, there was no sign, and rather than advance
into complete

darkness Gentle stopped and simply said, "Father?"

Though his voice had very little authority here, it was loud in such
utter silence, and must

surely have gone to every threshold within the radius of a dozen
streets. But if

Hapexamendios was in residence behind any of these doors, He made
no reply.

Gentle tried again. "Father. I want to see you."

As he spoke he peered down the shadowy street ahead, looking for
some sign, however

vestigial, of the Unbeheld's whereabouts. There was no murmur, no
motion. But his study

was rewarded by the slow comprehension that his Father, for all His
apparent absence, was

in fact here in front of him and to his left, and to his right, and above

his head, and beneath

his feet. What were those gleaming folds at the windows, if they weren't skin? What were

those arches, if they weren't bone? What was this scarlet pavement, and this light -shot

stone, if it wasn't flesh? There was pith and marrow here. There was tooth and lash and nail.

The Nullianac hadn't been speaking of spirit when it had said that

Hapexamendios was everywhere in this metropolis. This was the City of God; and God was

the city.

Twice in his life he'd had presentiments of this revelation. The first time when he'd

entered Yzordderrex, which had been commonly called a city—god itself and had been, he

now understood, his brother's unwitting attempt to recreate his Father's masterwork. The

second when he'd undertaken the business of similitudes and had realized, as the net of his

ambition encompassed London, that there was no part of it, from sewer to dome, that was

not somehow analogous to his anatomy.

Here was that theory proved. The knowledge didn't strengthen him but, instead, fueled the

dread he felt, thinking of his Father's immensity. He'd crossed a continent and more to get

here, and there'd been no part of it that was not made as these streets were made, his

Father's substance replicated in unimaginable quantities to become the raw materials for

the masons and carpenters and hod carriers of His will. And yet, for all its magnitude, what

was His city? A trap of corporeality, and its architect its prisoner.

“Oh, Father,” he said, and perhaps because the formality had gone from his voice, and there

was sorrow in it, he was finally granted a reply.

“You've done well for me,” the voice said.

Gentle remembered its monotony well. Here was the same barely discernible modulation

he'd first heard as he'd stood in the shadow of the Pivot.

“You 've succeeded where all the others failed,” Hapexa- mendios said. “They went astray

or let themselves be crucified. But you, Reconciler, you held to your course. “

“For your sake, Father.”

“And that service has earned you a place here,” the God said. “In my city. In my heart.”

“Thank you,” Gentle replied, fearful that this gift was going to mark the end of the

exchange.

If so, he'd have failed as his mother's agent. Tell Him you want to see His face, she'd said.

Distract Him. Flatter Him. Ah, yes, flattery!

“I want to learn from You now, Father,” he said. “I want to be able to carry Your wisdom

back into the Fifth with me.”

“You've done all you need to do, Reconciler,” Hapexamendios said. “You won't need to go

back into the Fifth, for your sake or mine. You 'll stay with me and

watch my work.”

“What work is that?”

“You know what work,” came the God's reply. “I heard you speak with the Nullianac, Why

are you pretending ignorance?”

The inflexions in His voice were too subtle to be interpreted. Was there genuine inquiry in

the question, or a fury at His son's deceit?

“I didn't wish to presume, Father,” Gentle said, cursing himself for this gaffe. “I thought

You'd want to tell me

Yourself.”

“Why would I tell you what you already know?” the God said, unwilling to be persuaded

from this argument until He had a convincing answer. “You already have every knowledge

you need—”

“Not every one,” Gentle said, seeing now how he might . divert the flow.

“What do you lack? “ Hapexamendios said. “I'll tell you everything.”

“Your face, Father.”

“My face? What about my face?”

“That's what I lack. The sight of Your face.”

“You've seen my city,” the Unbeheld replied. “That's my face.”—“There's no other? Really,

Father? None?”

“Aren't you content with that?” Hapexamendios said. “Isn't it perfect

enough? Doesn't it

shine?"

"Too much, Father. It's too glorious."

"How can a thing be too glorious?"

"Part of me's human, Father, and that part's weak. I look at this city, and I'm agog. It's a

masterwork—"

"Yes, it is."

"Genius."

"Yes, it is.";

"But Father, grant me a simpler sight. Show a glimpse of the face that made my face, so that

I can know the part of me that's You."

He heard something very like a sigh in the air around him.

"It may seem ridiculous to you," Gentle said, "but I've followed this course because I

wanted to see one face. One loving face." There was enough truth in this to lend his word s

real passion. There was indeed a face he'd hoped to find at the end of his journey. "Is it too

much to ask?" he said.

There was a flutter of movement in the dingy arena ahead, and Gentle stared into the

murk, in the expectation of some colossal door opening. But instead Hapexamendios said,

"Turn your back, Reconciler."

"You want me to leave?"

"No. Only avert your eyes."

Here was a paradox: to be told to look away when sight was requested. But there was

something other than an unveiling afoot. For the first time since entering the Dominion, he

heard sounds other than a voice: a delicate rustling, a muted patter, creaks and whirrings

stealing on his ear. And all around him, tiny motions in the solid street, as the monoliths

softened and inclined towards the mystery he'd turned his back upon. A step gaped and

oozed marrow. A wall opened where stone met stone, and a scarlet deeper than any he'd

seen, a scarlet turned almost black, ran in rills as the slabs yielded up their geometry,

lending themselves to the Unbeheld's purpose. Teeth came down from an unknitted balcony

above, and loops of gut unraveled from the sills, dragging down curtains of tissue as they

came.

As the deconstruction escalated, he dared the look he'd been forbidden, glancing back to

see the entire street in ross or petty motion: forms fracturing, forms congealing, forms

drooping and rising. There was nothing recognizable in the turmoil, and Gentle was about to

turn away when one of the pliant walls tumbled in the flux and for a heartbeat, no mo re, he

glimpsed a figure behind it. The moment was long enough to know the face he saw and have

it in his mind's eye when he looked away. There was no face its equal in the Imajica. For all

the sorrow on it, for all its wounds, it was exquisite.

Pie was alive and waiting there, in his Father's midst, a prisoner of the prisoner. It was all

Gentle could do not to turn there and then and pitch his spirit into the tumult, demanding

that his Father give the mystif up. This was his teacher, he'd say, his renewer, his perfect

friend. But he fought the desire, knowing such an attempt would end in calamity, and

instead turned away again, doting on the glimpse he'd had while the street behind him

continued to convulse. Though the mystif's body had been marked by the hurts it had

suffered, it was more whole than Gentle had dared hope. Perhaps it had drawn strength

from the land on which Hapexamendios' city was built, the Dominion its people had worked

their feits upon, before God had come to raise this metropolis.

But how should he persuade his Father to give the mystif up? With pleas? With further

flattery? As he chewed on the problem, the ructions around him began to subside, and he

heard Hapexamendios speak behind him.

"Reconciler? "

"Yes, Father?"

"You wanted to see my face."

"Yes, Father?"

"Turn and look."

He did so. The street in front of him had not lost all semblance of a thoroughfare. The

buildings still stood, their doors and windows visible. But their architect had claimed from

their substance sufficient pieces of the body he'd once owned to recreate it for Gentle's

edification. The Father was human, of course, and had perhaps been no larger than His son

in His first incarnation. But He'd remade Himself three times Gentle's height and more, a

teetering giant that was as much borne up by the street He'd racked for matter as of it.

For all His scale, however, His form was ineptly made, as if He'd forgotten what it was like

to be whole. His head was enormous, the shards of a thousand skulls claimed from the

buildings to construct it, but so mismatched that the mind it was meant to shield was visible

between the pieces, pulsing and flickering. One of His arms was vast, yet ended in a hand

scarcely larger than Gentle's, while the other was wizened, but finished with fin gers that had

three dozen joints. His torso was another mass of misalliances, His innards cavorting in a

cage of half a thousand ribs, His huge heart beating against a breastbone too weak, to

contain it and already fractured. And below, at His groin, the strangest deformation: a sex

He'd failed to conjure into a single organ, but which hung in rags, raw and useless. "Now,"

the God said. "Do you see?" The impassivity had gone from His voice, its monotony replaced

by an assembly of voices, as many larynxes, none of them whole,
labored to produce each

word.

“Do you see,” He said again, “the resemblance?”

Gentle stared at the abomination before him and, for all its
patchworks and disunions,

knew that he did. It wasn't in the limbs, this likeness, or in the torso,
or in the sex. But it was

there. When the vast head was raised, he saw his face in the ruin that
clung to his Father's

skull. A reflection of a reflection of a reflection, perhaps, and all in
cracked mirrors. But oh!

it was there. The sight distressed him beyond measure, not because he
saw the kinship but

because their roles seemed suddenly reversed. Despite its size, it was a
child he saw, its

head fetal, its limbs untutored. It was eons old, but unable to slough
off the fact of flesh,

while he, for all his naivetes, had made his peace with that disposal.

“Have you seen enough, Reconciler?” Hapexamendios said.

“Not quite.” “What then?”

Gentle knew he had to speak now, before the likeness was undone
again and the walls

were resealed. “I want what's in You, Father.” “In me?”

“Your prisoner, Father. I want Your prisoner.” “I have no prisoner.”

“I'm your son,” Gentle said. “The flesh of your flesh. Why do you lie to
me?”

The unwieldy head shuddered. The heart beat hard against the broken
bone.

“Is there something you don't want me to know?” Gentie said, starting towards the

wretched body. “You told me I could know everything.”

The hands, great and small, twitched and jittered.

“Everything, You said, because I've done You perfect service. But there's something You

don't want me to know.”

“There's nothing.”

“Then let me see the mystif. Let me see Pie 'oh' pah.”

At this the God's body shook, and so did the walls around it. There were eruptions of light

from beneath the ; flawed mosaic of His skull: little raging thoughts that cremated the air

between the folds of His brain. The sight was a reminder to Gentle that, however frail this

figure looked, it was the tiniest part of Hapexamendios' true scale. He was a city the size of a

world, and if the power that had raised that city, and sustained the bright blood in its stone,

was ever allowed to turn to destruction, it would beggar the Nullianacs.

Gentle's advance, which had so far been steady, was now , halted. Though he was a spirit

here and had thought no barrier could be raised against him, there was one before him now,

thickening the air. Despite it, and the dread he felt when reminded of his Father's powers, he

didn't retreat. He • knew that if he did so the exchange would be over and Hapexamendios

would be about His final business, His prisoner unreleased.

“Where's the pure, obedient son I had? “ the God said. :

“Still here,” Gentle replied. “Still wanting to serve You, if You'll deal with me honorably.”

A series of more livid bursts erupted in the distended skull. This time, however, they broke

from its dome and rose into the dark air above the God's head. There were images in these

energies, fragments of Hapexamendios' . thoughts, shaped from fire. One of them was Pie.

“You've no business with the mystif,” Hapexamendios said. “It belongs to me.”

“No, Father.”

“To me.”

“I married it, Father.”

The lightning was quieted momentarily, and the God's pulpy eyes narrowed.

“It made me remember my purpose,” Gentle said. “It made me remember to be a

Reconciler. I wouldn't be here—I wouldn't have served you—if it weren't for Pie 'oh' pah.”

“Maybe it loved you once,” the many throats replied. “But now I want you to forget it. Put it

out of your head forever. “

“Why?”

In reply came the parent's eternal answer to a child who asks too many questions.

“Because I tell you to,” the God said.

But Gentle wouldn't be hushed so readily. He pressed on. “What does

it know, Father?"

"Nothing."

"Does it know where Nisi Nirvana comes from? Is that what it knows?"

The fire in the Unbeheld's skull seethed at this. "Who told you that?" He raged.

There was no purpose served by lying, Gentle thought. "My mother," he said.

Every motion in the God's bloated body ceased, even to its cage-battering heart. Only the

lightning went on, and the next word came not from the mingled throats but from the fire

itself. Three syllables, spoken in a lethal voice.

"Cel. Est. Ine."

"Yes, Father."

"She's dead," the lightning said.

"No, Father. I was in her arms a few minutes ago." He lifted his hand, translucent though it

was. "She held these fingers. She kissed them. And she told me—"

"I don't want to hear!"

"—to remind You—"

"Where is she?"

"—of Nisi Nirvana."

"Where is she? Where? Where?"

He had been motionless, but now rose up in His fury, lifting His wretched limbs above His

head as if to bathe them in His own lightning.

"Where is she?" he yelled, throats and fire making the demand

together. “I want to see her!

I want to see her!”

On the stairs below the Meditation Room, Jude stood up. The gek-a-gek had begun a

guttural complaint that was, in its way, more distressing than any sound she'd ever heard

from them. They were afraid. She saw them sloping away from their places beside the door

like dogs in fear of a beating, their spines depressed, their heads flattened.

She glanced at the company below: the angels still kneeling beside their wounded Maestro;

Monday and Hoi-Polloi leaving off their vigil at the step and coming back into the

candlelight, as though its little ring could preserve them from whatever power was agitating

the air.

“Oh, Mama,” she heard Sartori whisper.

“Yes, child?”

“He's looking for us, Mama.”

“I know.”

“You can feel it?”

“Yes, child, I can.”

“Will you hold me, Mama? Will you hold me?”

“Where? Where?” the God was howling, and in the arcs above His skull shreds of His

mind's sight appeared.

Here was a river, serpentine; and a city, drabber than His metropolis but all the finer for

that; and a certain street; and a certain house. Gentle saw the eye Monday had scrawled on

the front door, its pupil beaten out by the Oviata's attack. He saw his own body, with Clem

beside it; and the stairs; and Jude on the stairs, climbing.

And then the room at the top, and the circle in the room, with his brother sitting inside it,

and his mother, kneeling at the perimeter.

"Cel Est. Ine," the God said. "Cel Est. Ine!"

It wasn't Sartori's voice that uttered these syllables, but it was his Hps that moved to

shape them. Jude was at the top of the stairs now, and she could see his face clearly. It was

still wet with tears, but there was no expression upon it whatsoever. She'd never seen

features so devoid of feeling. He was a vessel, filling up with another soul.

"Child?" Celestine said.

"Get away from him," Jude murmured.

Celestine started to rise. "You sound sick, child," she said.

The voice came again, this time a furious denial. "I Am Not. A. Child."

"You wanted me to comfort you," Celestine said. "Let me do that."

Sartori's eyes looked up, but it wasn't his sight alone that fixed on her.

"Keep. Away," he said.

"I want to hold you," Celestine said, and instead of retreating she stepped over the

boundary of the circle.

On the landing the gek-a-gek were in terror now, their sly retreat
become a dance of panic.

They beat their heads against the wall as if to hammer out their brains
rather than hear the

voice issuing from Sartori; this desperate, monstrous voice that said
over and over, “Keep.

Away. Keep. Away.”

— But Celestine wouldn't be denied. She knelt down again, in front of
Sartori. When she

spoke, however, it wasn't to the child, it was to the Father, to the God
who'd taken her into

this city of iniquities.

“Let me touch You, love,” she said. “Let me touch You, the way You
touched me.”

“No!” Hapexamendios howled, but His child's limbs refused to rise and
ward off the

embrace.

The denial came again and again, but Celestine ignored it, her arms
encircling them both,

flesh and occupying spirit in one embrace.

This time, when the God unleashed His rejection, it was no longer a
word but a sound, as

pitiful as it was terrifying.

In the First, Gentle saw the lightning above his Father's head congeal
into a single blinding

flame and go from Him, like a meteor.

In the Second, Chicka Jackeen saw the blaze brighten the Erasure and
fell to his knees on

the flinty ground. A signal fire was coming, he thought, to announce the moment of victory.

In Yzordderrex, the Goddesses knew better. As the fire broke from the Erasure and entered

the Second Dominion, the waters around the temple grew quiescent, so as not to draw death

down upon them. Every child was hushed, every pool and rivulet stilled. But the fire's malice

wasn't meant for them, and the meteor passed over the city, leaving it unharmed, outblazing

the comet as it went.

With the fire out of sight, Gentle turned back to his Father.

“What have You done?” he demanded.

The God's attention lingered in the Fifth for a little time, but as Gentle's demand came

again He withdrew His mind from His target, and His eyes regained their animation.

“I've sent a fire for the whore,” He said. It was no longer the lightning that spoke, but His

many throats.

“Why?”

“Because she tainted you... she made you want love.”

“Is that so bad?”

“You can't build cities with love,” the God said. “You can't make great works. It's

weakness.”

“And what about Nisi Nirvana?” Gentle said. “Is that a weakness too?”

He dropped to his knees and laid his phantom palms on the ground.

They had no power

here, or else he'd have started digging. Nor could his spirit pierce the ground. The same

barrier that sealed him from his Father's belly kept him from looking into His Dominion's

underworld. But he could ask the questions.

"Who spoke the words, Father?" he asked. "Who said: Nisi Nirvana?"

"Forget you ever heard those words," Hapexamendios replied. "The whore is dead. It's

over."

In his frustration Gentle made fists of his hands and beat on the solid ground.

"There's nothing there but Me," the many throats went on. "My flesh is everywhere. My

flesh is the world, and the world is My flesh."

On the Mount of Lipper Bayak, Tick Raw had given up his triumphal jig and was sitting at

the edge of his circle, waiting for the curious to emerge from their houses and come up to

question him, when the fire appeared in the Fourth— Like Chicka Jackeen, he assumed it

was some star of annunciation, sent to mark the victory, and he rose again to hail it. He

wasn't alone. There were several people below who'd spotted the blaze over the Jokalaylau

and were applauding the spectacle as it approached. When it passed overhead it brought a

brief noon to Vanaeph, before going on its way. It lit Patashoqua just as brightly, then flew

out of the Dominion through a fog that had just appeared beyond the

city, marking the first

passing place between the Dominion of green-gold skies and that of blue.

Two similar fogs had formed in Clerkenwell, one to the southeast of Gamut Street and the

other to the northwest, both marking doorways in the newly reconciled Dominion. It was the

latter that became blinding now, as the fire sped through it from the Fourth. The sight was

not unwitnessed. Several revenants were in the vicinity, and though they had no clue as to

what this signified, they sensed some calamity and retreated before the radiance, returning

to the house to raise the alarm. But they were too sluggish. Before they were halfway back to

Gamut Street the fog divided, and the Unbeheld's fire appeared in the benighted streets of

Clerkenwell.

Monday saw it first, as he forsook the little comfort of the candlelight and returned to the

step. The remnants of

Sartori's hordes were raising a cacophony in the darkness outside, but even as he crossed

the threshold to ward them off, the darkness became light.

From her place on the top stair Jude saw Celestine lay her lips against her son's and then,

with astonishing strength, lift his dead weight up and pitch him out of the circle. Either the

impact or the coming fire stirred him, and he began to rise, turning back towards his mother

as he did so. He was too late to reclaim his place. The fire had come.

The window burst like a glittering cloud and the blaze filled the room. Jude was flung off

her feet, but clutched the banister long enough to see Sartori cover his face against the

holocaust, as the woman in the circle opened her arms to accept it. Celestine was instantly

consumed, but the fire seemed unappeased and would have spread to burn the house to its

foundations had its momentum not been so great. It sped on through the room, demolishing

the wall as it went. On, on, towards the second fog that Clerkenwell boasted tonight.

“What the fuck was that?” Monday said in the hallway below.

“God,” Jude replied. “Coming and going.”

In the First, Hapexamendios raised His misbegotten head. Even though He didn't need the

assembly of sight that gleamed in His skull to see what was happening in His Dominion—He

had eyes everywhere—some memory of the body that had once been His sole residence

made Him turn now, as best He could, and look behind Him.

“What is this?” He said.

Gentle couldn't see the fire yet, but he could feel whispers of its approach.

“What is this?” Hapexamendios said again.

Without waiting for a reply, He began feverishly to unknit his semblance, something Gentle

had both feared and hoped He'd do. Feared, because the body from which the fire had been

issued would doubtless be its destination, and if it was too quickly undone, the fire would

have no target. And hoped, because only in that undoing would he have a chance to locate

Pie. The barrier around his Father's form softened as the God was distracted by the

intricacies of this dismantling, and though Gentle had yet to get a second glimpse of Pie he

turned his thought to entering the body; but for all His perplexity Hapexamendios was not

about to be breached so readily. As Gentle approached, a will too powerful to be denied

seized hold of him.

“What is this?” the God demanded a third time.

Hoping he might yet gain a few precious seconds' reprieve, Gentle answered with the

truth.

“The Imajica's a circle,” he said.

“A circle?”

“This is Your fire, Father. This is Your fire, coming around again.”

Hapexamendios didn't respond with words. He understood instantly the significance of

what He'd been told and let His hold on Gentle slip again, in order to turn all His will to the

business of unknitting Himself.

The ungainly body began to unravel, and in its midst Gentle once again glimpsed Pie. This

time, the mystif saw him. Its frail limbs thrashed to clear a way through the turmoil between

them, but before Gentle could finally wrest himself from his Father's custody the ground

beneath Pie 'oh' pah grew unsolid. The mystif reached up to take hold of some support in the

body above, but it was decaying too fast. The ground gaped like a grave, and, with one last

despairing look in Gentle's direction, the mystif sank from sight.

Gentle raised his head in a howl, but the sound he made was drowned out by that of his

Father, who—as if in imitation of His child—had also thrown back His head. But His was a

din of fury rather than sorrow, as He wrenched and thrashed in His attempts to speed His

unmasking.

Behind Him, now, the fire. As it came Gentle thought he saw his mother's face in the blaze,

shaped from ashes, her eyes and mouth wide as she returned to meet the God who'd raped,

rejected, and finally murdered her. A glimpse, no more, and then the fire was upon its

maker, its judgment absolute.

Gentle's spirit was gone from the conflagration at a thought, but His Father—the world His

flesh, the flesh His world—could not escape it. His fetal head broke, and the fire consumed

the shards as they flew, its blaze cremating His heart and innards and spreading through His

mismatched limbs, burning them away to every last fingertip and toe.

The consequence for His city was both instantly felt and calamitous.
Every street from one

end of the Dominion to the other shook as the message of collapse
went from the place

where its First Cause had fallen. Gentle had nothing to fear from this
dissolution, but the

sight of it appalled him nevertheless. This was his Father, and it gave
him neither pleasure

nor satisfaction to see the body whose child he was now reel and
bleed. The imperious

towers began to topple, their ornament dropping in rococo rains, their
arches forsaking the

illusion of stone and falling as flesh. The streets heaved and turned to
meat; the houses

threw down their bony roofs. Despite the collapse around him, Gentle
remained close to the

place where his Father had been consumed, in the hope that he might
yet find Pie loh' pah in

the maelstrom. But it seemed Hapexamendios' last voluntary act had
been to deny the lovers

their reunion. He'd opened the ground and buried the mystif in the pit
of His decay, sealing

it with His will to prevent Gentle from ever finding Pie again.

There was nothing left for the Reconciler to do but leave the city to its
decease, wh ich in

due course he did, not taking the route across the Dominions but
going back the way the fire

had come. As he flew, the sheer enormity of what was under way
became apparent. If every

living body that had passed a span on Earth had been left to putrefy

here in the First, the

sum of their flesh would not begin to approach that of this city. Nor would this carrion rot

into the ground and its decomposition feed a new generation of life. It was •• the ground; it

was the life. With its passing, there would only be putrescence here: decay laid on decay laid

on decay. A Dominion of filth, polluted until the end of time.

Ahead, now, the fog that divided the city's outskirts from the Fifth. Gentle passed through

it, returning gratefully to the modest streets of Clerkenwell. They were drab, of course, after

the brilliance of the metropolis he'd left. But he knew the air had the sweetness of summer

leaves upon it, even if he couldn't smell that sweetness, and the welcome sound of an engine

from Holborn or Gray's Inn Road could be heard, as some fleet fellow, knowing the worst

was past, got about his business. It was unlikely to be legal work at such an hour. But Gentle

wished the driver well, even in his crime. The Dominion had been saved for thieves as well

as saints.

He didn't linger at the passing place but went as fast as his weary thoughts would drive

him, back to number 28 and the wounded body that was still clinging to continuance at the

bottom of the stairs.

At the top, Jude hadn't waited for the smoke to clear before venturing into the Meditation

Room. Despite a warning shout from Clem she'd gone up into the murk to find Sartori,

hoping that he'd survived. His creatures hadn't. Their corpses were twitching close to the

threshold, not struck by the blast, she thought, but laid low by their summoner's decline. She

found that summoner easily enough. He was lying close to where Celestine had pitched him,

his body arrested in the act of turning towards the circle.

It had been his undoing. The fire that had carried his mother to oblivion had seared every

part of him. The ashes of his clothes had been fused with his blistered back, his hair singed

from his scalp, his face cooked beyond tenderness. But like his brother, lying in ribbons

below, he refused to give up life. His fingers clutched the boards; his lips still worked, baring

teeth as bright as a death's—head smile. There was even power in his sinews. When his

blood-filled eyes saw Jude he managed to push himself up, until his body rolled over onto its

charred spine, and he used his agonies to fuel the hand that clutched at her, dragging her

down beside him.

“My mother...”

“She's gone.”

There was bafflement on his face. “Why?” he said, shudders convulsing him as he spoke.

“She seemed... to want it. Why?”

“So that she'd be there when the fire took Hapexamendios,” Jude

replied.

He shook his head, not comprehending the significance of this.

“How... could that... be?” he murmured.

“The Imajica's a circle,” she said. He studied her face, attempting to puzzle this out. “ The

fire went back to the one who sent it.”

Now the sense of what she was telling him dawned. Even in his agony, here was a greater

pain.

“He's gone?” he said.

She wanted to say, I hope so, but she kept that sentiment to herself and simply nodded.

“And my mother too?” Sartori went on. The trembling quieted; so did his voice, which was

already frail. “I'm alone,” he said.

The anguish in these last few words was bottomless, and she longed to have some way of

comforting him. She was afraid to touch him for fear of causing him still greater discomfort,

but perhaps there was more hurt in her not doing so. With the greatest delicacy she laid her

hand over his.

“You're not alone,” she said. “I'm here.”

He didn't acknowledge her solace, perhaps didn't even hear it. His thoughts were

elsewhere.

“I should never have touched him,” he said softly. “A man shouldn't lay hands on his own

brother.”

As he squeezed out these words there was a moan from the bottom of the stairs, followed

by a yelp of pure joy from Clem, and then Monday's ecstatic whoops.

“Boss oh boss oh boss!”

“Do you hear that?” Jude said to Sartori.

“Yes....”

“I don't think you killed him after all.”

A strange tic appeared around his mouth, which after a moment she realized was the

shreds of a smile. She took it to be pleasure at Gentle's survival, but its source was more

bitter.

“That won't save me now,” he said.

His hand, which was laid on his stomach, began to knead the muscles there, its clutches so

violent that his body began to spasm. Blood bubbled up between his lips, and he moved his

hand to his mouth, as if to conceal it. There, he seemed to spit his blood into his palm. Then

he removed his hand and offered its grisly contents to her.

“Take it,” he said, uncurling his fist.

She felt something drop into her hand. She didn't glance at his gift, however, but kept her

eyes fixed on his face as he looked away from her, back towards the circle. She realized, even

before his gaze had found its resting place, that he was looking away from her for the final

time, and she started to call him back. She said his name; she called him love; she said she'd

never wanted to desert him, and never would again, if he'd only stay. But her words were

wasted. As his eyes found the circle, the life went from them, his last sight not of her but of

the place where he'd been made.

In her palm, bloody from his belly and throat, lay the blue egg.

After a time, she got up and went out onto the landing. The place at the bottom of the stairs

where Gentle's body had lain was empty. Clem was standing in the candlelight with both

tears and a broad smile on his face. He looked up at Jude as she started down the stairs.

"Sartori?" he said.

"He's dead."

"What about Celestine?"

"Gone," she said.

"But it's over, isn't it?" Hoi-Polloi said. "We're going to live."

"Are we?"

"Yes, we are," said Clem. "Gentle saw Hapexamendios destroyed."

"Where is Gentle?"

"He went outside," Clem said. "He's got enough life in him—"

"For another life?"

"For another twenty, the lucky bugger," came Tay's reply.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, she put her arms around Gentle's protectors, then went

out onto the step. Gentle was standing in the middle of the street,

wrapped in one of

Celestine's sheets. Monday was at his side, and he was leaning on the boy as he stared up at

the tree that grew outside number 28. Hapexamendios' fire had charred much of its foliage,

leaving the branches naked and blackened. But there was a breeze stirring the leaves that

had survived, and after such a long motionless time even these shreds of wind were

welcome: final, simple proof that the Imajica had survived its perils and was once again

drawing breath.

She hesitated to join him, thinking perhaps he'd prefer to have these moments of

meditation uninterrupted. But his gaze came her way after half a minute or so, and though

there was only starlight and the last guttering flames in the fretwork above to see him by,

the smile was as luminous as ever, and as inviting. She left the step but, as she approached,

saw that his smile was slender and the wounds he'd sustained deeper than cuts.

"I failed," he said.

"The Imajica's whole," she replied. "That isn't failure."

He looked away from her, down the street. The darkness was full of agitation.

"The ghosts are still here," he said. "I swore to them I'd find a way out, and I failed. That

was why I went with Pie in the first place, to find Taylor a way out—"

“Maybe there isn't one,” came a third voice.

Clem had appeared on the doorstep, but it was Tay who spoke.

“I promised you an answer,” Gentle said.

“And you found one. The Imajica's a circle, and there's no way out of it. We just go round

and round. Well, that's not so bad, Gentle, We have what we have.”

Gentle lifted his hand from Monday's shoulder and turned away from the tree, and from

Jude, and from the angels on the step. As he hobbled out into the middle of the street, his

head bowed, he murmured a reply to Tay too quiet for any but an angel's ear. “It's not

enough,” he said.

For the living occupants of Gamut Street, the days that followed the events of that

midsummer were as strange in their way as anything that had gone before. The world that

returned to life around them seemed to be totally ignorant of the fact that its existence had

hung in the balance, and if it now sensed the least change in its condition it concealed its

suspicion very well. The monsoons and heat waves that had preceded the Reconciliation

were replaced the next morning with the drizzles and tepid sunshine of an English summer,

its moderation the model for public behavior in subsequent weeks. The eruptions of

irrationality which had turned every junction and street corner into a little battleground

summarily ceased; the night walkers Monday and Jude had seen watching for revelation no

longer strayed out to peer quizzically at the stars.

In any city other than London, perhaps the mysteries now present in its streets would have

been discovered and celebrated. If such fogs as lingered in Clerkenwell had appeared

instead in Rome, the Vatican would have been pronouncing on them within a week. Had they

appeared in Mexico City, the poor would have been through them in a shorter time still,

desperate for a better life in the world beyond. But England: oh! England. It had never had

much of a taste for the mystical, and with all but the weakest of its evocators and feit

workers murdered by the Tabula Rasa, there was nobody to begin the labor of freeing minds

locked up in dogmas and utilities.

The fogs were not entirely ignored, however. The animal life of the city knew something

was afoot and came to Clerkenwell to sniff it out. The runaway dogs who'd gathered in the

vicinity of Gamut Street when the revenants had come, only to be frightened off by Sartori's

horde, now returned, their noses twitching after some piquant scent or other. Cats came too,

yowling in the trees at dusk, curious but casual. There were also visitations by bees, and

birds, who twice in the three days following midsummer gathered in the same stupefying

numbers as Monday and Jude had witnessed at the Retreat. In all these cases the packs,

swarms, and flocks disappeared after a time, having discovered the source of the perfumes

and poles that had directed them to the district and gone into the Fourth to have a life under

different skies.

But if no two-legged traffic passed into the Fourth, there was certainly some in the

opposite direction. A little over a week after the Reconciliation, Tick Raw arrived on the

doorstep of number 28 and, having introduced himself to Clem and Monday, asked to see the

Maestro. He came into a house that was a good deal more comfortable

than his quarters in

Vanaeph, furnished as it was from a score of recent burglaries by Monday and Clem. But the

atmosphere of domesticity was cosmetic. Though the bodies of the gek-a-gek had been

removed and buried, along with their summoner, beneath the long grass in Shiverick Square;

though the front door had been mended and the bloodstains mopped up; though the

Meditation Room had been scoured and the stones of the circle individually wrapped in

linen and locked away, the house was charged with all that had happened here: the deaths,

the love scenes, the reunions and revelations.

"You're living in the middle of a history lesson," Tick Raw said when he sat himself down

beside the bed in which Gentle lay.

The Reconciler was healing, but even with his extraordinary powers of recuperation it

would be a lengthy business. He slept twenty hours or more out of every twenty -four and

barely ventured from his mattress when he was awake.

"You look as though you've seen some wars, my friend," Tick Raw said.

"More than I'd like," Gentle replied wearily.

"I sniff something Oviate."

"Gek-a-gek," Gentle said. "Don't worry, they're gone."

"Did they break through during the ceremony?"

“No. It's more complicated than that. Ask Clem. He'll tell you the whole story.”

“No offense to your friends,” Tick Raw said, fetching a jar of pickled sausage from his

pocket, “but I'd prefer to hear it from you.”

“I've thought about it too much as it is,” Gentle said. “I don't want to be reminded.”

“But we won the day,” Tick Raw said. “Doesn't that merit a little celebration?”

“Celebrate with Clem, Tick. I need to sleep.”

“As you like, as you like,” Tick Raw said, retreating to the door. “Oh. I wonder? Do you

mind if I stay here for a few days? There's a number of parties in Vanaeph who want the

grand tour of the Fifth, and I've volunteered to show them the sights. But as I don't yet know

them myself—”

“Be my guest,” Gentle said. “And forgive me if I don't brim with bonhomie.”

“No apology required,” Tick Raw said. “I'll leave you to sleep.”

That evening, Tick did as Gentle had suggested and plied both Clem and Monday with

questions until he had the full story.

“So when do I meet the mesmeric Judith?” he asked when the tale was told.

“I don't know if you ever will,” Clem said. “She didn't come back to the house after we

buried Sartori.”

“Where is she?”

"Wherever she is," Monday said dolefully, "Hoi-Polloi's with her. Just my fuckin' luck."

"Well, now, listen," Tick Raw said. "I've always had a way with the ladies. I'll make you a

deal. If you show me this city, inside out, I'll show you a few ladies the same way."

Monday's palm went from his pocket, where it'd been stroking the consequence of Hoi -

Polloi's absence, and seized hold of Tick Raw's hand before it was even extended.

"You're a gentleman an' a squalor," Monday said. "You got yourself a tour, mate."

"What about Gentle?" Tick Raw said to Clem. "Is he languishing for want of female

company?"

"No, he's just tired. He'll get well."

"Will he?" said Tick Raw. "I'm not so sure. He's got the look of a man who'd be happier

dead than alive."

"Don't say that."

"Very well. I didn't say it. But he has, Clement. And we all know it."

The vigor and noise Tick Raw brought into the house only served to emphasize the truth of

that observation. As the days passed and turned to weeks, there was little or no

improvement in Gentle's mood. He was, as Tick Raw had said, languishing, and Clem began

to feel the way he had during Tay's final decline. A loved one was slippin g away, and he

could do nothing to prevent it. There weren't even those moments of

levity that there'd been

with Tay, when good times had been remembered and the pain superseded. Gentle wanted

no false comforts, no laughter, no sympathy. He simply wanted to lie in his bed and steadily

become as bland as the sheets he lay upon. Sometimes, in his sleep, the angels would hear

him speaking in tongues, the way Tay had heard him talk before. But it was nonsense that he

muttered: reports from a mind that was rambling without map or destination.

Tick Raw stayed in the house a month, leaving with Monday at dawn and returning late,

having had another day seeing the sights and acquiring the appetites of this new Dominion.

His sense of wonder was boundless, his capacity for pleasure prodigal. He found he had a

taste for eel pie and Elgar, for Speaker's Corner at Sunday noon and the Ripper's haunts at

midnight; for dog races, for jazz, for waistcoats made in Saville Row and women hired

behind King's

Cross Station. As for Monday, it was clear from the face he wore whenever he returned that

the hurt of Hoi-Polloi's desertion was being kissed away. When Tick Raw finally announced

that it was time to return to the Fourth, the boy was crestfallen.

"Don't worry," Tick told him. "I'll be back. And I won't be alone."

Before he departed, he presented himself at Gentle's bedside with a

proposal.

“Come to the Fourth with me,” he said, “it's time you saw Patashoqua.”

Gentle shook his head.

“But you haven't seen the Merrow Ti' Ti\” Tick protested.

“I know what you're trying to do, Tick,” Gentle said. “And I thank you for it, really I do, but

I don't want to see the Fourth again.”

“Well, what do you want to see?”

The answer was simple: “Nothing.”

“Oh, now stop this, Gentle,” Tick Raw said. “It's getting damn boring. You're behaving as

though we lost everything. We didn't.”

“I did.”

“She'll come back. You'll see.”

“Who will?”

“Judith.”

Gentle almost laughed at this. “It's not Judith I've lost,” he said.

Tick Raw realized his error then, and came as near to dumbfounded as he ever got. All he

could manage was: “Ah....”

For the first time since Tick Raw had appeared at his bedside the month before, Gentle

actually looked at his guest. “Tick,” he said. “I'm going to tell you something I've told nobody

else.”

“What's that?”

“When I was in my Father's city . . .” He paused, as though the will to tell was going from

him already, then began again. “When I was in my Father's city I saw Pie 'oh' pah.”

“Alive?”

“For a time.”

“Oh, Jesu. How did it die?”

“The ground opened up beneath it.”

“That's terrible; terrible.”

“Do you see now why it doesn't feel like a victory?”

“Yes, I see. But Gentle—”

“No more persuasions, Tick.”

”—there are such changes in the air. Maybe there are the miracles in the First, the way

there are in Yzordderrex. It's not out of the question.”

Gentle studied his tormentor, eyes narrowed.

“The Eurhetemecs were in the First long before Hapexamendios, remember,” Tick went on.

“And they worked wonders there. Maybe those times have returned. The land doesn't forget.

Men forget; Maestros forget. But the land? Never.”

He stood up.

“Come with me to a passing place,” he said. “Let's look for ourselves. Where's the harm? I'll

carry you on my back if your legs don't work.”

“That won't be necessary,” Gentle said, and throwing off the sheets got out of bed.

Though the month of August had yet to begin, the early months of

summer had been

marked by such excesses that the season had burned itself out prematurely, and when

Gentle, accompanied by Tick and Clem, stepped out into Gamut Street, he met the first chills

of autumn on the step. Clem had found the fog that let onto the First Dominion within forty -

eight hours of the Reconciliation, but had not entered it. After all that he'd heard about the

state of the Unbeheld's city, he'd had no wish to see its horrors. He led the Maestros to the

place readily enough, however. It was little more than half a mile from the house, hidden in a

cloister behind an empty office building: a bank of gray fog, no more than twice the height of

a man, which rolled upon itself in the shadowed corner of the empty yard.

"Let me go first," Clem said to Gentle. "We're still your guardians."

"You've done more than enough," Gentle said. "Stay here. This won't take long."

Clem didn't contradict the instruction but stepped aside to let the Maestros enter the fog.

Gentle had passed between Dominions many times now and was used to the brief

disorientation that always accompanied such passage. But nothing, not even the abattoir

nightmares that had haunted him after the Reconciliation, could have prepared him for what

was waiting on the other side. Tick Raw, ever a man of instant responses, vomited as the

stench of putrescence came to meet them through the fog, and though he stumbled after

Gentle, determined not to leave his friend to face the First alone, he covered his eyes after a

single glance.

The Dominion was decayed from horizon to horizon. Everywhere rot, and more rot:

suppurating lakes of it, and festering hills. Overhead, in skies Gentle had barely seen as he

passed through his Father's city, clouds the color of old bruises half hid two yellowish

moons, their light falling on a filth so atrocious the hungriest kite in the Kwem would have

starved rather than feed here.

"This was the City of God, Tick," Gentle said. "This was my Father. This was the Unbeheld."

In a sudden fury he tore at Tick's hands, which were clamped to the man's face.

"Look, damn you, look! I want to hear you tell me about the wonders, Tick! Go on! Tell me!

Tell me!"

Tick didn't go back to the house when he and Gentle emerged from the passing place, but

with some murmured words of apology headed off into the dusk, saying he needed to be on

his home turf for a while and that he'd come back when he'd regained his comp osure. Sure

enough, three days later he reappeared at number 28, still a little queasy, still a little

shamefaced, to find that Gentle had not returned to his bed but was up and about. The

Reconciler's mood was brisk rather than blithe. His bed, he explained to Tick, was not the

refuge it had previously been. As soon as he closed his eyes he saw the slaughterhouse of the

First in every atrocious detail and could now only sleep when he'd driven himself to such

exhaustion that there was no time between his head striking the pillow and oblivion for his

mind to dwell on what he'd witnessed.

Luckily, Tick had brought distractions, in the form of a party of eight tourists (he preferred

excursionists) from Vanaeph who were relying upon him to introduce them to the rites and

rarities of the Fifth Dominion. Before the tour began, however, they were eager to pay their

respects to the great Reconciler, and did so with a succession of painfully overworked

speeches, which they read aloud before presenting Gentle with the gifts they'd brought:

smoked meats, perfumes, a small picture of Patashoqua rendered in zarzi wings, a pamphlet

of erotic poems by Pluthero Quexos' sister.

The group was the first of many Tick brought in the next few weeks, freely admitting to

Gentle that he was turning a handsome profit from his new role. "Have a Holy Day in the City

of Sartori" was his pitch^ and the more satisfied customers who returned to Vanaeph with

tales of eel pies and Jack the Ripper, the more who signed on to take the excursion. He knew

the boom time couldn't last, of course. In a short while the

professional tour operators in

Patashoqua would start trading, and he'd be unable to compete with their slick packages,

except in one particular regard. Only he could guarantee an audience, however brief, with

the Maestro Sartori himself.

The time was coming, Gentle realized, when the Fifth would have to face the fact that it

was Reconciled, whether it liked it or not. The first few sightseers from Vanaeph and

Patashoqua might be ignored; but when their families came, and their families' families—

creatures in shapes, size, and assemblies that demanded attention—the people of this

Dominion would be able to overlook them no longer. It would not be long before Gamut

Street became a sacred highway, with travelers passing down it in not one but both

directions. When it did, living in the house would become untenable. He, Clem, and Monday

would have to vacate number 28 and leave it to become a shrine.

When that day arrived—and it Would be soon—he would be forced to make a momentous

decision. Should he seek out some sanctuary here in Britain or leave the island for a country

where none of his lives had ever, taken him? Of one thing he was certain: he would not

return to the Fourth, or any Dominion beyond it. Though it was true that he'd never seen

Patashoqua, there had only ever been one soul he'd wanted to see it with, and that soul was

gone.

Times were no less strange or demanding for Jude. She'd decided to leave the company in

Gamut Street on the spur of the moment, expecting that she'd return there in due course. But

the longer she stayed away, the harder it became to return. She hadn't realized, until Sartori

was gone, how much she'd mourn. Whatever the source of the feelings she had for him, she

felt no regrets. All she felt was loss. Night after night she'd wake up in the little flat she and

Hoi-Polloi had rented together (the old place was too full of memories), shaken to tears by

the same terrible dream. She was climbing those damn stairs in Gamut Street, trying to

reach Sartori as he lay burning at the top, but for all her toil never managing to advance a

single step. And always the same words on her lips when Hoi-Polloi woke her.

"Stay with me. Stay with me."

Though he'd gone forever, and she would have to make her peace with that eventually,

he'd left a living keepsake, and as the autumn months came it began to make its presence

felt in no uncertain fashion, its kicking keeping her awake when the nightmares didn't. She

didn't like the way she looked in the mirror, her stomach a glossy dome, her breasts swelling

and tender, but Hoi-Polloi was there to lend comfort and

companionship whenever it was

needed. She was all Jude could have asked for during those months: loyal, practical, and

eager to learn. Though the customs of the Fifth were a mystery to her at first, she soon

became familiar with its eccentricities and even fond of them. This was not, however, a

situation that could continue indefinitely. If they stayed in the Fifth, and Jude had the child

there, what could she promise it? A rearing and an education in a Dominion that might come

to appreciate the miracles in its midst some distant day, but would in the meantime ignore

or reject whatever extraordinary qualities the child was blessed with.

By the middle of October she'd made up her mind. She'd leave the Fifth, with or without

Hoi-Polloi, and find some country in the Imajica where the child, whether it was a prophetic,

a melancholic, or simply priapic, would be allowed to flourish. In order to take that journey,

of course, she would have to return to Gamut Street or its environs, and though that was not

a particularly attractive prospect, it was better to do so soon, she reasoned, before many

more sleepless nights took their toll and she felt too weak. She shared her plans with Hoi-

Polloi, who declared herself happy to go wherever Jude wished to lead. They made swift

preparations and four days later left the flat for the last time, with a small collection of

valuables to pawn when they got to the Fourth.

The evening was cold, and the moon, when it rose, had a misty halo.
By its light the

thoroughfares around Gamut Street were iridescent with the first
etchings of frost. At Jude's

request they went first to Shiverick Square, so that she could pay her
last respects to Sartori.

Both his grave and those of the Oviates had been well disguised by
Monday and Clem, and it

took her quite a while to find the place where he was buried. But find
it she did and spent

twenty minutes there while Hoi-Polloi waited at the railings. Though
there were revenants

in the nearby streets, she knew he would never join their ranks. He'd
not been born, but

made, the stuff of his life stolen. The only existence he had after his
decease was in her

memory and in the child. She didn't weep for that fact, or even for his
absence. She'd done

all she could, weeping and begging him to stay. But she did tell the
earth that she'd loved

what it was heaped upon and charged it to give Sartori comfort in his
dreamless sleep.

Then she quit the graveside, and together she and Hoi-Polloi went
looking for the passing

place into the Fourth. It would be day there, bright day, and she'd call
herself by another

name.

Number 28 was noisy that night, the cause a celebration in honor of
Irish, who'd that

afternoon been released from prison, having served a three-month
sentence for petty theft,

and had arrived on the doorstep—with Carol, Benedict, and several cases of stolen whisky—

to toast his release. The house was by now a trove of treasures—all gifts to the Maestro from

Tick Raw's excursionists—and there was no end to the drunken fooling these artifacts, many

of them total enigmas, inspired. Gentle was feeling as facetious as Irish, if not more so. After

so many weeks of abstinence the substantial amounts of whisky he'd imbibed had his head

spinning, and he resisted Clem's attempts to engage him in serious conversation, despite the

latter's insistence that the matter was urgent. Only after some persuading did he follow

Clem to a quieter place in the house, where his angels told him that Judith was in the

vicinity. He was somewhat sobered by the news.

“Is she coming here?” he asked.

“I don't think so,” Clem said, his tongue passing back and forth over his lips as though her

taste was upon them. “But she's close.”

Gentle didn't need further prompting. With Monday in tow he went out into the street.

There were no living creatures in sight. Only the revenants, listless as ever, their joy -

lessness made all the more apparent by the sound of merrymaking that emanated from the

house.

“I don't see her,” Gentle said to Clem, who had followed them out as

far as the step. "Are

you sure she's here?"

It was Tay who replied. "You think I wouldn't know when Judy was near? Of course I'm

certain."

"Which direction?" Monday wanted to know.

Now Clem again, cautioning; "Perhaps she doesn't want to see us."

"Well, I want to see her," Gentle replied. "At least a drink, for old time's sake. Which

direction, Tay?"

The angels pointed, and Gentle headed off down the street, with Monday, bottle in hand,

close on his heels.

The fog that let onto the Fourth looked inviting: a slow wave of pale mist that turned and

turned on itself, but never broke. Before she and Hoi-Polloi stepped into it, Jude took a few

moments to look up. The Plow was overhead. She wouldn't be seeing it again. Then she said,

"That's enough goodbyes," and together they took a step into the mist.

As they did so Jude heard the sound of running feet in the alleyway behind them and

Gentle, calling her name. She'd been aware that their presence might be detected and had

schooled them both in how best to respond. Neither woman turned. They simply picked up

their pace and headed on through the mist. It thickened as they went, but after a dozen steps

daylight began to filter through from the other side, and the fog's

clammy cold gave way to

balm. Again, Gentle called after her, but there was a commotion up ahead, and it all but

drowned out his call.

Back in the Fifth, Gentle came to a halt at the edge of the fog. He'd sworn to himself that

he'd never leave the Dominion again, but the drink swilling in his system had weakened his

resolve. His feet itched to go after her into the fog.

"Well, boss," Monday said. "Are we going or aren't we?"

"Do you care either way?"

"Yes, as it happens."

"You'd still like to get your hands on Hoi-Polloi, huh?"

"I dream about her, boss. Cross-eyed girls, every night."

"Ah, well," Gentle said. "If we're chasing dreams, then I think that's good reason to go."

"Yeah?"

"In fact it's the only reason."

He grabbed hold of Monday's bottle and took a healthy swig from it.

"Let's do it," he said, and together they plunged into the fog, running over ground that

softened and brightened as they went, paving stones becoming sand, night becoming day.

They caught sight of the women briefly, gray silhouettes against the peacock sky ahead,

then lost them again as they gave chase. The gleam of day grew, however, and so did the

sound of voices, which rose to the din of an excited crowd as they

emerged from the pass ing

place. There were buyers, sellers, and thieves on every side, and, disappearing into the

throng, the women. They followed with renewed fervor, but the tide of people conspired to

keep them from their quarry, and after half an hour of fruitless pursuit, which finally

brought them back to the fog and the commercial hubbub which surrounded it, they had to

admit that they'd been outmaneuvered.

Gentle was tetchy now, his head no longer buzzing but aching. "They're away," he said.

"Let's give up on it."

"Shit."

"People come, people go. You can't afford to get attached to anyone."

"It's too late," Monday said dolefully. "I am."

Gentle squinted at the fog, his lips pursed. It was a cold October on the other side.

"I tell you what," he said after a little time. "We'll wander over to Vanaeph and see if we

can find Tick Raw. Maybe he can help us."

Monday beamed. "You're a hero, boss. Lead the way."

Gentle went on tiptoe, attempting to orient himself.

"Trouble is, I haven't a bloody clue where Vanaeph is," he said.

He collared the nearest passerby and asked him how to get to the Mount. The fellow

pointed over the heads of the crowd, leaving the boss and his boy to burrow their way to the

edge of the market, where they had a view not of Vanaeph but of the walled city that stood

between them and the Mount of Lipper Bayak. The grin reappeared on Monday's face,

broader than ever, and on his lips the name he'd so often breathed like an enchantment.

"Patashoqua?"

"Yes."

"We painted it on the wall together, d'you remember?"

"I remember."

"What's it like inside?"

Gentle was peering at the bottle in his hand, wondering if the peculiar exhilaration he felt

was going to pass with the headache that accompanied it.

"Boss?"

"What?"

"I said, what's it like inside?"

"I don't know. I've never been."

"Well, shouldn't we?"

Gentle thrust the bottle at Monday and sighed, a lazy, easy sigh that ended in a smile. "Yes,

my friend," he said. "I think maybe we should."

Thus began the last pilgrimage of the Maestro Sartori— called John Furie Zacharias, or

Gentle, the Reconciler of Dominions—across the Imajica.

He hadn't intended it to be a pilgrimage at all, but having promised Monday that they

would find the woman of his dreams, he couldn't bring himself to

desert the boy and return

to the Fifth. They began their search, of course, in Patashoqua, which was more prosperous

than ever these days, with its proximity to the newly reconciled Dominion creating

businesses every day. After almost a year of wondering what the city would be like, Gentle

was inevitably somewhat disappointed once he got inside its walls, but Monday's

enthusiasm was a sight in itself, and a poignant reminder of his own astonishment when he

and Pie had first entered the Fourth.

Unable to trace the women in the city, they went on to Vanaeph, hoping to find Tick. He

was off traveling, they were told, but one sharp-sighted individual claimed to have seen two

women who fitted the description of Jude and Hoi-Polloi hitching a ride at the edge of the

highway. An hour later, Gentle and Monday were doing the same thing, and the pursuit that

was to take them across the Dominions began in earnest.

For the Maestro the journey was very different from those that had preceded it. The first

time he'd made this trek he'd traveled in ignorance of himself, failing to comprehend the

significance of the people he'd met and the places he'd seen. The second time he'd been a

phantom, flying at the speed of thought between members of the Synod, his business too

urgent to allow him to appreciate the myriad wonders he was passing through. But now,

finally, he had both the time and the comprehension to make sense of his pilgrimage, and,

having begun the journey reluctantly, he soon had as much taste for it as his companion.

Word of the changes in Yzordderrex had spread even to the tiniest villages, and the demise

of the Autarch's Empire was everywhere cause for jubilation. Rumors of the Imajica's

healing had also spread, and when Monday told people where he and his quiet companion

came from (which he was wont to do at the vaguest cue) they were plied with drinks and

grilled for news of the paradisiacal Fifth. Many of their questioners, knowing that the door

into that mystery finally stood open, were planning to visit the Fifth and wanted to know

what gifts they should take with them into a Dominion that was already so full of marvels.

When this question was put, Gentle, who usually let Monday do the talking during these

interviews, invariably spoke up.

"Take your family histories," he'd say. "Take your poems. Take your jokes. Take your

lullabies. Make them understand in the Fifth what glories there are here."

People tended to look at him askance when he answered in this fashion, and told him that

their jokes and their family histories didn't seem particularly glorious. Gentle would simply

say, "They're you. And you're the best gift the Fifth could be given."

“You know, we could have made a fortune if we'd brought a few maps of England with us,”

Monday remarked one day.

“Do we care about fortunes?” Gentle said.

“You might not, boss,” Monday replied. “Personally, I'm much in favor.”

He was right, Gentle thought. They could have sold a thousand maps already, and they

were only just entering the Third: maps which would have been copied, and the copies

copied, each transcriber inevitably adding their own felicities to the design. The thought of

such proliferation led Gentle back to his own hand, which had seldom worked for any

purpose other than profit, and which for all its labor had never produced anything of lasting

value. But unlike the paintings he'd forged, maps weren't cursed by the notion of a definitive

original. They grew in the copying, as their inaccuracies were corrected, their empty spaces

filled, their legends redevise. And even when all the corrections had been made, to the

finest detail, they could still never be cursed with the word finished, because their subject

continued to change. Rivers widened and meandered, or dried up altogether; islands rose

and sank again; even mountains moved. By their very nature, maps were always works in

progress, and Gentle—his resolve strengthened by thinking of them that way—decided after

many months of delay to turn his hand to making one.

Occasionally along the road they'd meet an individual who, in ignorance of his audience,

would boast some association with the Fifth's most celebrated son, the Maestro Sartori, and

would proceed to tell Gentle and Monday about the great man. The accounts varied,

especially when it came to talk of his companion. Some said he'd had a beautiful woman at

his side; some his brother, called Pie; others still (these the least numerous) told of a mystic.

At first it was all Monday could do not to blurt the truth, but Gentle had insisted from the

outset that he wanted to travel incognito, and having been sworn to secrecy the boy was as

good as his word. He kept his silence while wild tales of the Maestro's doings were told:

marriages celebrated on the ceiling; corpses springing up overnight where he'd slept; women

made pregnant drinking from his cup. The fact that he'd become a figment of the popular

imagination amused Gentle at first, but after a time it began to weigh on him. He felt like a

ghost among these living versions of himself, invisible among the listeners who gathered to

hear tales of his exploits, the details of which were embroidered and embellished with every

telling.

There was some comfort in the fact that he was not the only character around whom such

parables occurred. There were other fables alive in the air between the ears and tongues of

the populace, which the pilgrims were usually told when they asked after Jude and Hoi -

Polloi: tales of miraculous women. A whole new nomadic tribe had appeared in the

Dominions since the fall of Yzordderrex. Women of power were abroad, rising to the

occasion of their liberation, and rites they'd only practiced at the hearth and cot were now

performed in the open air for all to see. But unlike the stories of the Maestro Sartori, most of

which were pure invention, Gentle and Monday saw ample evidence that the stories

concerning these women were rooted in truth. In the province around Maike, for instance,

which had been a dust bowl during Gentle's first pilgrimage, they found fields green with the

first crop in six seasons, courtesy of a woman who'd sniffed out the course of an

underground river and coaxed it to the surface with sways and supplications. In the temples

of L'Himby a sibyl had carved from a solid slab—using only her finger and her spittle—a

representation of the city as she prophesied it would be in a year's time, her prophecy so

mesmeric that her audience had gone out of the temple that very hour and had torn down

the trash that had disfigured their city. In the Kwem—where Gentle took Monday in the

hope of finding Scopique—they found instead that the once shallow pit where the Pivot had

stood was now a lake, its waters crystalline but its bottom hidden by the congregation of life

that was forming in it: birds, mostly, which rose in sudden excited flocks, fully feathered and

ready for the sky.

Here they had a chance to meet the miracle worker, for the woman who'd made these

waters (literally, her acolytes said; it was the pissing of a single night) had taken up

residence in the blackened husk of the Kwem Palace. In the hope of gleaning some clue to

Jude and Hoi-Polloi's whereabouts, Gentle ventured into the shadows to find the lake maker,

and though she refused to show herself she answered his inquiry. No, she hadn't seen a pair

of travelers such as he described, but yes, she could tell him where they'd gone. There were

only two directions for wandering women these days, she explained: out of Yzordderrex and

into it.

He thanked her for this information and asked her if there was anything he could do for

her in return. She told him that there was nothing she wanted from him personally, but

she'd be very glad of the company of his boy for an hour or two. Somewhat chagrined, Gentle

went out and asked Monday if he was willing to chance the woman's embrace for a while. He

said he was and left the Maestro to find himself a seat by the bird-breeding lake while he

ventured into its maker's boudoir. It was the first time in Gentle's life

that any woman in

search of sexual attentions had passed him over for another. If ever he'd needed proof that

his day was done, it was here.

When, after two hours, Monday reappeared (with a flushed face and ringing ears), it was to

find Gentle sitting at the lakeside, long ago tired of working on his map, surrounded by

several small cairns of pebbles.

"What are these?" the boy said.

"I've been counting my romances," Gentle replied. "Each one of them is a hundred women."

There were seven cairns.

"Is that them all?" Monday said.

"It's all that I remember."

Monday squatted down beside the stones. "I bet you'd like to love them all over again," he

said.

Gentle thought about this for a little time and finally said, "No. I don't think so. I've done

my best work. It's time to leave it to the younger men."

He tossed the stone he had in hand out into the middle of the teeming lake.

"Before you ask," he said. "That was Jude."

There were no diversions after that, nor any need to pursue rumors of women hither and

thither. They knew where Jude and Hoi-Polloi had gone. Having left the lake, they were on

the Lenten Way within a matter of hours. Unlike so much else, the Way hadn't changed. It

was as busy and as wide as ever: an arrow, driving its straight way into the hot heart of

Yzordderrex.

In the Fifth, winter came: not suddenly but certainly. Hallowe'en was the last time people

chanced the night air without coats, hats, and gloves, and it saw the first substantial

visitation of Londoners to Gamut Street—revelers who'd taken the spirit of All Hallow's Eve

to heart and come to see if there was any truth in the bizarre rumors they'd heard about the

neighborhood. Some retreated after a very short time, but the braver among them stayed to

explore, a few lingering outside number 28, where they puzzled over the designs on the door

and peered up at the carbonized tree that shaded the house from the stars.

After that evening the cold's nip became a bite, and the bite a gnaw, until by late November

the temperatures were low enough to keep even the most ardent tomcat at the fire. But the

flow of visitors—in both directions—didn't cease. Night after night ordinary citizens

appeared in Gamut Street to brush shoulders with the excursionists who were coming in the

opposite direction. Some of the former became such regular visitors that Clem began to

recognize them and was able to watch their investigations grow less tentative as they

realized that the sensations they felt were not the first signs of lunacy. There were wonders

to be found here, and one by one these men and women must have discovered the source,

because they invariably disappeared. Others, perhaps too afraid to venture into the passing

places alone, came with trusted friends, showing them the street as though it were a secret

vice, talking in whispers, then laughing out loud when they found their loved ones could see

the apparitions too.

Word was spreading. But that fact was the only pleasure those bitter days and nights

provided. Though Tick Raw spent more and more time in the house and was lively company,

Clem missed Gentle badly. He hadn't been altogether surprised at his abrupt departure (he'd

known, even if Gentle hadn't, that sooner or later the Maestro would leave the Dominion),

but now his truest company was the man with whom he shared his skull, and as the first

anniversary of Tay's death approached the mood of both grew steadily darker. The presence

of so many living souls on the street only served to make the revenants who'd occupied it

through the summer months feel further disenfranchised, and their distress was contagious.

Though Tay had been happy to stay with Clem through the preparations for the Great Work,

their time as angels was over, and Tay felt the same need as those ghosts who roamed

outside the house: to be gone.

As December came, Clem began to wonder how many more weeks he

could keep his post,

when it seemed every hour the despair of the ghost in him grew. After much debate with

himself he decided that Christmas would mark the last day of his service in Gamut Street.

After that he'd leave number 28 to be tramped around by Tick's excursionists and go back to

the house where a year before he and Tay had celebrated the Return of the Unvanquished

Sun.

Jude and Hoi-Polloi had taken their time crossing the Dominions, but with so many roads

to choose between, and so many incidental joys along the way, going quickly seemed a lmost

criminal. They had no reason to hurry. There was nothing behind them to drive them on, and

nothing in front summoning them. At least, so Jude pretended. Time and time again, when

the issue of their ultimate destination cropped up in conversation, she avoided talking about

the place she knew in her heart of hearts they would eventually reach. But if the name of

that city wasn't on her lips, it was on the lips of almost every other woman they met, and

when Hoi-Polloi mentioned that it was her birthplace questions from fellow travelers would

invariably flow thick and fast. Was it true that the harbor was now filled at every tide with

fish that had swum up from the depths of the ocean, ancient creatures that knew the secret

of the origins of women and swam up the rivered streets at night to

worship the Goddesses

on the hill? Was it true that the women there could have children without any need of men

whatsoever, and that some could even dream babies into being? And were there fountains in

that city that made the old young, and trees on which every fruit was new to the world? And

so on, and so forth.

Though Jude was willing, if pressed, to supply descriptions of what she'd seen in

Yzordderrex, her accounts of how the palace had been refashioned by water, and of streams

that defied gravity, were not particularly remarkable in the face of what rumor was claiming

about Yzordderrex. After a few conversations in which she was urged to describe marvels

she had no knowledge of—as though the questioners were willing her to invent prodigies

rather than disappoint them—she told Hoi-Polloi she'd not be drawn into any further

debates on the subject. But her imagination refused to ignore the tales it heard, however

preposterous, and with every mile they traveled along the Lenten Way, the idea of the city

awaiting them at the end of their journey grew more intimidating. She fretted that perhaps

the blessings bestowed on her there would be valueless after all the time she'd spent away

from the place. Or that the Goddesses knew that she'd told Sartori—in all truth—that she

loved him, and that Jokalaylau's condemnation of her would carry the day if she ever went

back into their temple.

Once they were on the Lenten Way, however, such fears became academic. They were not

going to turn back now, especially as both of them were becoming steadily more exhausted.

The city called them out of the fogs that lay between Dominions, and they would go into it

together and face whatever judgments, prodigies, and deep-sea fish were waiting there.

Oh, but it was changed. A warmer season was on the Second than when Jude had last been

here, and with so much water running in the streets the air was tropical. But more

breathtaking than the humidity was the growth it had engendered. Seeds and spores had

been carried up from the seams and caverns beneath the city in vast numbers, and under the

influence of the Goddesses feits had matured with preternatural speed. Ancient forms of

vegetation, most long believed extinct, had greened the rubble, turning the Kesparates into

luxuriant jungle. In the space of half a year Yzordderrex had come to resemble a lost city,

sacred to women and children, its desolation salved by flora. The smell of ripeness was

everywhere, its source the fruits that glistened on vine and bough and bush, the abundance

of which had in turn attracted animals that would never have dared Yzordderrex under its

previous regime. And running through this cornucopia, feeding the seeds it had raised from

the underworld, the eternal waters, still flowing up the hillsides in their riotous way but no

longer carrying their fleets of prayers. Either the requests of those who lived here had been

answered, or else their baptisms had made them their own healers and restorers.

Jude and Hoi-Polloi didn't go up to the palace the day they arrived. Nor the day after, nor

the day after that. Instead, they searched for the Peccable house and there made themselves

comfortable, though the tulips on the dining room table had been replaced by a throng of

blossoms that had erupted through the floor, and the roof had become an aviary. After so

long a journey, in which they'd not known from night to night where they were going to lay

their heads, these were minor inconveniences, and they were grateful to be at rest, lulled to

sleep by cooings and chatterings in beds that were more like bowers. When they woke, there

was plenty to eat: fruit that could be picked off the trees, water that ran clear and cold in the

street outside, and, in some of the larger streams, fish, which formed the staple diet of the

clans that lived in the vicinity.

There were men as well as women among these extended families, some of whom must

have been members of the mobs and armies that had run so brutally riot on the night the

Autarch fell. But either gratitude at having survived the revolution or the calming influence

of the growth and plenitude around them had persuaded them to better purpose. Hands that

had maimed and murdered were now employed rebuilding a few of the houses, raising their

walls not in defiance of the jungle, or the waters that fed it, but in league with both. This

time, the architects were women, who'd come down from their baptisms inspired to use the

wreckage of the old city to create a new one, and everywhere Jude saw echoes of the serene

and elegant aesthetic that marked the Goddesses' handiwork.

There was no great sense of urgency attending these constructions, nor, she thought, any

sign of a grand design being adhered to. The age of empire was over, and all dogmas, edicts,

and conformities had gone with it. People solved the problems of putting a roof over their

heads in their own way, knowing that the trees were both shady and bountiful in the

meantime; the houses that resulted were as different as the faces of the women who

supervised their construction. The Sartori she'd met in Gamut Street would have approved,

Jude thought. Hadn't he touched her cheek during their penultimate encounter and told her

he'd dreamed of a city built in her image? If that image was woman then here was that city,

rising from the ruins.

So by day they had the murmuring canopy, the bubbling rivers, the

heat, the laughter. And

by night, slumbers beneath a feathered roof and dreams that were kind and uninterrupted.

Such was the case, at least, for a week. But on the eighth night, Jude was woken by Hoi-

Polloi, who called her to the window.

“Look.”

She looked. The stars were bright above the city and ran silver in the river below. But

there were other forms in the water, she realized: more solid but no less silver. The talk

they'd heard on the road was true. Climbing the river were creatures that no fishing boat,

however deep it trawled, would ever have found in its nets. Some had a trace of dolphin in

them, or squid, or manta ray, but their common trait was a hint of humanity, buried as deep

in their past (or future) as their homes were in ocean. There were limbs on some of them,

and these few seemed to leap the slope rather than swim it. Others were as sinuous as eels

but had heads that carried a mammalian cast, their eyes luminous, their mouths fine enough

to make words.

The sight of their ascent was exhilarating, and Jude stayed at the window until the entire

shoal had disappeared up the street. She had no doubt of their destination, nor indeed of her

own, after this.

“We’re as rested as we’re ever going to be,” she said to Hoi-Polloi.

“So it’s time to go up the hill?”

“Yes. I think it is.”

They left the Peccable house at dawn in order to make much of the ascent before the comet

climbed too high and the humidity sapped their strength. It had never been an easy journey,

but even in the cool early morning it became a backbreaking trudge, especially for Jude, who

felt as though she were carrying a lead weight in her womb rather than a living soul. She had

to call a halt to the climb several times and sit in the shade to catch her breath, but on the

fourth such occasion she rose to find her gasps becoming steadily shallower and a pain in

her belly so acute she could barely hold on to consciousness. Her agitation —and Hoi-Polloi’s

yelps—drew helping hands, and she was being lowered onto a knoll of flowering grasses

when her waters broke.

A little less than an hour later, not more than half a mile from where the gate of the twin

saints Creaze and Evendown had stood, in a grove busy with tiny turquoise birds, she gave

birth to the Autarch Sartori’s first and only child.

Though Jude and Hoi-Polloi’s pursuers had left the lake maker in the Kwem with clear

directions, they still reached Yzordderrex six weeks later than the women. This was in part

because Monday’s sexual appetite was significantly depleted after his

liaison in the Kwem

Palace, and he set a far less hectic pace than he had hitherto, but more particularly because

Gentle's enthusiasm for cartography grew by leaps and bounds. Barely an hour would go by

without his remembering some province he'd passed through, or some signpost he'd seen,

and whenever he did so the journey was interrupted while he brought out his handmade

album of charts and religiously set down the details, rattling off the names of uplands,

lowlands, forests, plains, highways, and cities like a litany while he worked. He wouldn't be

hurried, even if the chance of a ride was missed, or a good drenching gained in the process.

This was, he told Monday, the true great work of his life, and he only regretted that he'd

come to it so late.

These interruptions notwithstanding, the city got closer day by day, mile by mile, until one

morning, when they raised their heads from their pillows beneath a hawthorn bush, the

mists cleared to show them a vast green mountain in the distance.

"What is that place?" Monday wondered.

Astonished, Gentle said, "Yzordderrex."

"Where's the palace? Where's the streets? All I can see is trees and rainbows."

Gentle was as confounded as the boy. "It used to be gray and black and bloody," he said.

"Well, it's fucking green now."

It got greener the closer they came, the scent of its vegetation so sweetening the air that

Monday soon lost his scowl of disappointment and remarked that perhaps this wouldn't be

so bad after all. If Yzordderrex had turned into a wild wood, then maybe all the women had

become savages, dressed in berry juice and smiles. He could suffer that awhile.

What they found on the lower slopes, of course, were scenes more extraordinary than

Monday's most heated imaginings. So much of what the inhabitants of the New Yzordderrex

took for granted—the anarchic waters, the primeval trees—left both man and boy agog.

They gave up voicing their awe after a time and simply climbed through the lavish thicket,

steadily sloughing off the weight of baggage they'd accrued on their journey and leaving it

scattered in the grass.

Gentle had intended to go to the Eurhetemec Kesparate in the hope of locating Athanasius,

but with the city so transformed it was a slow and difficult trek, so it was more luck than wit

that brought them, after an hour or more, to the gate. The streets beyond it were as

overgrown as those they'd come through, the terraces resembling some orchard that had

been left to riot, its fallen fruit the rubble that lay between the trees.

At Monday's suggestion, they split up to search for the Maestro, Gentle telling the boy that

if he saw Jesus somewhere in the trees then he'd discovered Athanasius. But they both came

back to the gate having failed to find him, obliging Gentle to ask some children who'd come

to play swinging games on the gate if any of them had seen the man who'd lived here. One of

the number, a girl of six or so with her hair so plaited with vines she looked as though she

was sprouting them, had an answer.

"He went away," she said.

"Do you know where?"

"Nope," she said again, speaking on behalf of her little tribe.

"Does anybody know?"

"Nope."

Which exchange brought the subject of Athanasius to a swift halt.

"Where now?" Monday asked, as the children returned to their games.

"We follow the water," Gentle replied.

They began to ascend again, while the comet, which had long since passed its zenith, made

the contrary motion. They were both weary now, and the temptation to lie down in some

tranquil spot grew with every stride they took. But Gentle insisted they go on, reminding

Monday that Hoi-Polloi's bosom would be a far more comfortable place to lay his head than

any hummock, and her kisses more invigorating than a dip in any pool. His talk was

persuasive, and the boy found an energy Gentle envied, bounding on to clear the way for the

Maestro, until they reached the mounds of dark rubble that marked the walls of the palace.

Rising from them, the columns from which had once hung an enormous pair of gates were

turned to playthings by the waters, which climbed the right pillar in rivulets and threw

themselves across the gap in a drizzling arch that squarely struck the top of the left. It was a

most beguiling spectacle, and one . that claimed Gentle's attention completely, leaving

Monday to head between the columns alone.

After a short time his shout came back to fetch Gentle, and it was blissful.

“Boss? Boss! Come here!”

Gentle followed where Monday's cries led, through the warm rain beneath the arch and

into the palace itself. He found Monday wading across a courtyard, fragrant with the lilies

that trembled on its flood, towards a figure standing beneath the colonnade on the other

side. It was Hoi-Polloi. Her hair was plastered to her scalp, as though she'd just swum the

pool, and the bosom upon which Monday was so eager to lay his head was bare.

“So you're here at last,” she said, looking past Monday towards Gentle.

Her eager beau lost his footing halfway across, and lilies flew as he hauled himself to his

feet.

“You knew we were coming?” he said to the girl.

“Of course,” she replied. “Not you. But the Maestro. We knew the

Maestro was coming.”

“But it's me you're glad to see, right?” Monday spluttered. “I mean, you are glad?”

She opened her arms to him, “What do you think?” she said.

He whooped his whoop and splashed on towards her, peeling off his soaked shirt as he

went. Gentle followed in his wake. By the time he reached the other side Monday was

stripped down to his underwear.

“How did you know we were coming here?” Gentle asked the girl.

“There are prophecies everywhere,” she said. “Come on. I'll take you up.”

“Can't he go on his own?” Monday protested.

“We'll have plenty of time later,” Hoi-Polloi said, taking his hand. “But first I have to take

him up to the chambers.”

The trees within the ring of the demolished walls dwarfed those outside, inspired to

unprecedented growth by the almost palpable sanctity of this place. There were women and

children in their branches and among their gargantuan roots, but Gentle saw no men here

and supposed that if Hoi-Polloi hadn't been escorting them they'd have been asked to leave.

How such a request would have been enforced he could only guess, but he didn't doubt that

the presences which charged the air and earth here had their ways. He knew what those

presences were: the promised Goddesses, whose existence he'd first heard mooted in

Beatrix, while sitting in Mother Splendid's kitchen.

The journey was circuitous. There were several places where the rivers ran too hard and

deep to be forded, and Hoi-Polloi had to lead them to bridges or stepping stones, then

double back along the opposite bank to pick up the track again. But the farther they went,

the more sentient the air became, and though Gentle had countless questions to ask he kept

them to himself rather than display his naivete.

There were tidbits from Hoi-Polloi once in a while, so casually dropped they were enigmas

in themselves. "... the fires are so comical..." she said at one point, as they passed a pile of

twisted metalwork that had been one of the Autarch's war machines. And at another place,

where a deep blue pool housed fish the size of men, said: "... apparently they have their own

city . . . but it's so deep in the ocean I don't suppose I'll ever see it. The children will, though.

That's what's wonderful...."

Finally, she brought them to a door that was curtained with running water and, turning to

Gentle, said, "They're waiting for you."

Monday went to step through the curtain at Gentle's side, but Hoi-Polloi restrained him

with a kiss on his neck.

"This is just for the Maestro," she said. "Come along. We'll go

swimming.”

“Boss?”

“Go ahead,” Gentle told him. “No harm's going to come to me here.”

“I'll see you later then,” Monday said, content to have Hoi-Polloi tug him away.

Before they'd disappeared into the thicket, Gentle turned to the door, dividing the cool

curtain with his fingers and stepping into the chamber beyond. After the riot of life outside,

both its scale and its austerity came as a shock. It was the first structure he'd seen in the city

that preserved something of his brother's lunatic ambition. Its vastness was uninvaded by

all but a few shoots and tendrils, and the only waters that ran here were at the door behind

him and those falling from an arch at the other end. The Goddesses had not left the chamber

entirely unmarked, however. The walls of what had been built as a windowless hall were

now pierced on all sides, so that for all its immensity the place was a honeycomb, penetrated

by the soft light of evening. There was only one item of furniture: a chair, close to the distant

arch, and seated upon it, with a baby on her lap, was Judith.

As Gentle entered, she looked up from the child's face and smiled at him. “I was beginning

to think you'd lost your way,” she said.

Her voice was light: almost literally, he thought. When she spoke, the beams that came

through the walls flickered,

"I didn't know you were waiting," he said.

"It's been no great hardship," she said. "Won't you come closer?" As he crossed the

chamber towards her, she said, "I didn't expect you to follow us at first, but then I thought,

He will, he will, because he'll want to see the child."

"To be honest... I didn't think about the child."

"Well, she thought about you," Jude said, without rebuke.

The baby in her lap could not be more than a few weeks old but, like the trees and flowers

here, was burgeoning. She sat on Jude's lap rather than lay, one small strong hand clutching

her mother's long hair. Though Jude's breasts were bare and comfortable, the child had no

interest in nourishment or sleep. Her gray eyes were fixed on Gentle, studying him with an

intense and quizzical stare.

"How's Clem?" Jude asked when Gentle stood before her.

"He was fine when I last saw him. But I left rather suddenly, as you know. I feel rather

guilty about that. But once I'd started ..."

"I know. There was no turning back. It was the same for me."

Gentle went down on his haunches in front of Jude and offered his hand, palm up, to the

child. She grasped it instantly.

"What's her name?" he said.

"I hope you won't mind ..."

“What?”

“I called her Huzzah.”

Gentle smiled up at Jude. “You did?” Then back to the baby, called by her scrutiny:

“Huzzah?” he said, leaning his face towards hers. “Huzzah. I'm Gentle.”

“She knows who you are,” Jude said, without a trace of doubt. “She knew about this room

before it even existed. And she knew you'd come here, sooner or later.”

Gentle didn't inquire as to how the child had shared her knowledge. It was just one more

mystery to add to the catalogue in this extraordinary place.

“And the Goddesses?” he said.

“What about them?”

“They don't mind that she's Sartori's child?”

“Not at all,” Jude said, her voice daintier at the mention of Sartori.

“The whole city... the

whole city's here to prove how good can come from bad.”

“She's better than good, Jude,” Gentle said.

She smiled, and so did the child. “Yes, she is.”

Huzzah was reaching for Gentle's face, ready to topple from Jude's lap in pursuit of her

object.

“I think she sees her father,” Jude said, lifting the child back into the crook of her arm and

standing up.

Gentle also stood, watching Jude carry Huzzah to a litter of playthings

on the ground. The

child pointed and gurgled.

“Do you miss him?” he said.

“I did in the Fifth,” Jude replied, her back still turned while she picked up Huzzah's chosen

toy. “But I don't here. Not since Huzzah. I never felt quite real till she appeared. I was a

figment of the other Judith.” She stood up again, turning to Gentle. “You know I still can't

really remember all those missing years? I get snatches of them once in a while, but nothing

solid. I suppose I was living in a dream. But she's woken me, Gentle.” Jude kissed the baby's

cheek. “She's made me real. I was only a copy until her. We both were. He knew it and I knew

it. But we made something new.” She sighed. “I don't miss him,” she said. “But I wish he

could have seen her. Just once. Just so he could have known what it was to be real too.”

She started to cross back to the chair, but the child reached out for Gentle again, letting out

a little cry to emphasize her wishes.

“My, my,” Jude said. “You are popular.”

She sat down again and put the toy she'd picked up in front of Huzzah. It was a small blue

stone.

“Here, darling,” she cooed. “Look. What's this? What's this?”

Gurgling with pleasure, the child claimed the plaything from her mother's finger with a

dexterity far beyond her tender age. The gurgles became chuckles, as she laid it to her lips,

as if to kiss it.

“She likes to laugh,” Gentle said.

“She does, thank God. Oh, now listen to me. Still thanking God.”

“Old habits ...”

“That one'll die,” Jude said firmly.

The child was putting the toy to her mouth.

“No, sweetie, don't do that,” Jude said. Then, to Gentle: “Do you think the Erasure'll decay

eventually? I have a friend here called Lotti; she says it will. It'll decay, and then we'll have

to live with the stench from the First every time the wind comes that way.”

“Maybe a wall could be built.”

“By whom? Nobody wants to go near the place.”

“Not even the Goddesses?”

“They've got their work here. And in the Fifth, They want to free the waters there too.”

“That should be quite a sight.”

“Yes, it should. Maybe I'll go back for that,”

Huzzah's laughter had subsided during this exchange, and she was once again studying

Gentle, reaching up towards him from her mother's lap. This time her tiny hand was not

open but clutching the blue stone.

“I think she wants you to have it,” Jude said.

He smiled at the child and said, "Thank you. But you should keep it."

Her gaze became more intent at this, and he was certain she understood every word he

was saying. Her hand still proffered its gift, determined he should take it.

"Go on," Jude said.

As much at the behest of the eyes as at Jude's words, Gentle reached down and gingerly

took the stone from Huzzah's hand. There was some considerable strength in her. The stone

was heavy: heavy and cool.

"Now our peace is really made," Jude said.

"I didn't know we'd been at war," Gentle replied.

"That's the worst kind, isn't it?" Jude said. "But it's over now. It's over forever."

There was a subtle modulation in the plush of the water-curtained arch behind her, and

she glanced around. Her expression had been grave, but when she looked back at Gentle she

had a smile on her face.

"I have to go," she said as she stood.

The child was chuckling and clutching the air.

"Will I see you again?" Gentle said.

Jude shook her head slowly, looking at him almost indulgently.

"What for?" she murmured. "We've said all we have to say. We've forgiven each other. It's

finished."

"Will I be allowed to stay in the city?"

“Of course,” she said with a little laugh. “But why would you want to?”

“Because I’ve come to the end of the pilgrimage.”

“Have you?” she said, turning from him to pad towards the arch. “I thought you had one

Dominion left.”

“I’ve seen it. I know what’s there.”

There was a pause. Then Jude said, “Did Celestine ever tell you her story? She did, didn’t

she?”

“The one about Nisi Nirvana?”

“Yes. She told it to me too, the night before the Reconciliation. Did you understand it?”

“Not really.”

“Ah.”

“Why?”

“It’s just that I didn’t either, and I thought maybe . . .” She shrugged. “I don’t know what I

thought.”

She was at the archway now, and the child was peering over her shoulder at somebody

who’d appeared behind the veil of water. The visitor was not, Gentle thought, quite human.

“Hoi-Polloi mentioned our other guests, did she?” Jude said, seeing his astonishment. “They

came up out of the ocean, to woo us.” She smiled. “Beautiful, some of them. There’s going to

be such children....”

The smile faltered, just a little.

“Don't be sad, Gentle,” she said. “We had our time.”

Then she turned from him and took the child through the curtain. He heard Huzzah laugh

to see the face that awaited them on the other side, and saw its owner put his silvery arms

around mother and child. Then the light in his eyes brightened, running in the curtain, and

when it dimmed the family had gone.

Gentle waited in the empty chamber for several minutes, knowing Jude wasn't going to

come back, not even certain that he wanted her to but unable to depart until he had fixed in

his memory all that had passed between them. Only then did he return to the door and step

out into the evening air. There was a different kind of enchantment in the wild wood now.

Soft blue mists drooped from the canopy and crept up from the pools. The mellifluous songs

of dusk birds had replaced those of noon, and the busy drone of pollinators had given way to

breath-wing moths.

He looked for Monday but failed to find him, and although there was nobody to prevent his

loitering in this idyll, he felt ill at ease. This was not his place now. By day it was too full of

life, and by night, he guessed, too full of love. It was a new experience for him to feel so

utterly immaterial. Even on the road, hanging back from the fires

while nonsense tales were

told, he'd always known that if he'd simply opened his mouth and identified himself he

would have been feted, encircled, adored. Not so here. Here he was nothing: nothing and

nobody. There were new growths, new mysteries, new marriages.

Perhaps his feet understood that better than his head, because before he'd properly

confessed his redundancy to himself they were already carrying him away, out under the

water-clad arches and down the slope of the city. He didn't head towards the delta but

towards the desert, and though he'd not seen the purpose in this journey when Jude had

hinted at it, he didn't now deny his feet their passage.

When he'd last emerged from the gate that led out into the desert he'd been carrying Pie,

and there'd been a throng of refugees around them. Now he was alone, and though he had no

other weight to carry besides his own, he knew the trek ahead of him would exhaust what

little sum of will was left to him. He wasn't much concerned at this. If he perished on the

way, it scarcely mattered. Whatever Jude had said, his pilgrimage was at an end.

As he reached the crossroads where he'd encountered Floccus Dado, he heard a shout

behind him and turned to see a bare-chested Monday galloping towards him through the

dwindling light, mounted on a mule, or a striped variation thereof.

“What were you doing, going without me?” he demanded when he reached Gentle's side.

“I looked for you, but you weren't around. I thought you'd gone off to start a family with

Hoi-Polloi.”

“Nah!” said Monday. “She's got funny ideas, that girl. She said she wanted to introduce me

to some fish. I said I wasn't too keen on fish, 'cause the bones get stuck in your throat. Well,

that's right, innit? People choke on fish, regular. Anyhow, she looks at me like I just farted

and says maybe I should go with you after all. An' I said, I didn't even know you was leaving.

So she finds me this ugly little fuck”—he slapped the hybrid's flank —“and points me in this

direction.” He glanced back at the city. “I think we're well out of there,” he said, dropping his

voice. “There was too much water, if you ask me. D'you see it at the gate? A great fuckin'

fountain.”

“No, I didn't. That must be recent.”

“See? The whole place is going to drown. Let's get the fuck out of here. Hop on.”

“What's the beast called?”

“Tolland,” Monday said with a grin. “Which way are we headed?”

Gentle pointed towards the horizon.

“I don't see nothin'.”

“Then that must be the right direction.”

Ever the pragmatist, Monday hadn't left the city without supplies. He'd

made a sack of his

shirt and filled it to bursting with succulent fruits, and it was these that sustained them as

they traveled. They didn't halt when night came, but kept up their steady pace, taking turns

to walk beside the beast so as not to exhaust it and giving it at least as much of the fruit as

they ate themselves, plus the piths, cores, and skins of their own portions.

Monday slept much of the time that he rode, but Gentle, despite his fatigue, remained wide

awake, too vexed by the problem of how he was going to set this wasteland down in his book

of maps to indulge himself in slumber. The stone Huzzah had given him was constantly in his

hand, coaxing so much sweat from his pores that several times a little pool gathered in the

cup of his palm. Discovering this, he would put the stone away, only to find a few minutes

later that he'd taken it out of his pocket without even realizing that he'd done so, and his

fingers were once again making play with it.

Now and then he'd cast a backward glance towards Yzordderrex, and it made quite a sight,

the benighted flanks of the city glittering in countless places, as though the waters in its

streets had become perfect mirrors for the stars. Nor was Yzordderrex the only source of

such splendor. The land between the gates of the city and the track that they were following

also gleamed here and there, catching its own fragments of the sky's display.

But all such enchantments were gone by the first sign of dawn. The city had long since

disappeared into the distance behind them, and the thunderheads in front were lowering.

Gentle recognized the baleful color of this sky from the glimpse he and Tick Raw had

snatched of the First, Though the Erasure still sealed Hapexamendios' pestilence from the

Second, its taint was too persuasive to be obliterated, and the bruised heavens loomed vaster

as they traveled, lying along the entire horizon and climbing to their zenith.

There was some good news, however: they weren't alone. As the wretched remains of the

Dearthers' tents appeared on the horizon, so too did a congregation of God spotters, thirty

or so, watching the Erasure. One of them saw Gentle and Monday approaching, and word of

their arrival passed through the small crowd until it reached one who instantly pelted in the

travelers' direction.

"Maestro! Maestro!" he yelled as he came.

It was Chicka Jackeen, of course, and he was in a fair ecstasy to see Gentle, though after the

initial flood of greetings the talk became grim.

"What did we do wrong, Maestro?" he wanted to know. "This isn't the way it was meant to

be, is it?"

Gentle did his weary best to explain, astonishing and appalling Chicka Jackeen by turns.

“So Hapexamendios is dead?”

“Yes, he is. And everything in the First is His body. And it's rotting to high heaven.”

“What happens when the Erasure decays?”

“Who knows? I'm afraid there's enough rot to stink out the Dominion.”

“So what's your plan?” Chicka Jackeen wanted to know.

“I don't have one.”

The other looked confounded at this. “But you came all the way here,” he said. “You must

have had some notion or other.”

“I'm sorry to disappoint you,” Gentle replied, “but the truth is, this was the only place left

for me to go.” He stared at the Erasure. “Hapexamendios was my Father, Lucius. Perhaps in

my heart of hearts I believe I should be in the First with Him.”

“If you don't mind me saying so, boss—” Monday broke in.

“Yes?”

“That's a bloody stupid idea.”

“If you're going to go in, so am I,” Chicka Jackeen said. “I want to see for myself. A dead

God's something to tell your children about, eh?”

“Children?”

“Well,” said Jackeen, “it's either that or write my memoirs, and I haven't got the patience

for that.”

“You?” Gentle said. “You waited two hundred years for me, and you

say you haven't got

patience?"

"Not any more," came the reply. "I want a life, Maestro."

"I don't blame you."

"But not before I've seen the First."

They'd reached the Erasure by now, and while Chicka Jackeen went among his colleagues

to tell them what he and the Reconciler were going to do, Monday once again piped up with

his opinion on the venture.

"Don't do it, boss," he said. "You've got nothing to prove. I know you were pissed off that

they didn't throw a party in Yzordderrex, but fuck 'em, I say—or, rather, don't. Let 'em have

their fish."

Gentle laid his hands on Monday's shoulders. "Don't worry," he said. "This isn't a suicide

mission."

"So what's the big hurry? You're dead beat, boss. Have a sleep. Eat something. Get strong.

There's all of tomorrow not touched yet."

"I'm fine," Gentle said. "I've got my talisman."

"What's that?"

Gentle opened his palm and showed Monday the blue stone.

"A fuckin' egg?"

"An egg, eh?" Gentle said, tossing the stone in his hand. "Maybe it is."

He threw it up into the air a second time, and it rose, far higher than his muscle had

propelled it, way up above their heads. At the summit of its ascent it seemed to hover for a

beat and then returned into his hand at leisure, defying the claim of gravity. As it descended

it brought the faintest drizzle down with it, cooling their upturned faces.

Monday cooed with pleasure. "Rain out of nowhere," he said. "I remember that."

Gentle left him bathing the grime from his face and went to join Chicka Jackeen, who had

finished explaining his intentions to his colleagues. They all hung back, watching the

Maestros with uneasy stares.

"They think we're going to die," Chicka Jackeen explained.

"They may very well be right," Gentle said quietly. "Are you certain you want to come with

me?"

"I was never more certain of anything." — With that they started towards the ambiguous

ground that lay between the solidity of the Second and the Erasure's vacancy. As they went,

one of Jackeen's friends began to call after him, in distress at his departure. The cry was

taken up by several others, their shouts too mingled to be interpreted. Jackeen halted for a

moment and glanced back towards the company he was leaving. Gentle made no attempt to

urge him on. He ignored the shouts and picked up his speed, the Erasure thickening around

him and the smell of the devastation that lay on the other side growing stronger with every

step he took. He was prepared for it, however. Instead of holding his breath, he drew the

stench of his Father's rot deep into his lungs, defying its pungency. There was another shout

from behind him, but this time it wasn't one of Jackeen's friends, it was the Maestro himself,

his voice colored more by wonder than alarm. Its tone piqued Gentle's curiosity, and he

glanced back over his shoulder to seek Jackeen out, but the nullity had come between them.

Unwilling to be delayed, Gentle forged on, a purpose in his stride he didn't comprehend. His

enfeebled legs had found strength from somewhere; his heart was urgent in his chest.

Ahead, the blinding murk was stirring, the first vague forms of the First's terrain emerging.

And from behind, Jackeen again.

"Maestro? Maestro! Where are you?"

Without slowing his stride, Gentle returned the call.

"Here!"

"Wait for me!" Jackeen gasped. "Wait!" He emerged from the void to lay his hand on

Gentle's shoulder.

"What is it?" Gentle said, looking around at Jackeen, who as if in bliss had dropped the toll

of years and was once again a young man, sweaty with awe at the way of feits.

"The waters," he said.

“What about them?”

“They've followed you, Maestro. They've followed you!”

And as he spoke, they came. Oh, how they came! They ran to Gentle's feet in glittering rills

that broke against his ankles and his shins and leapt like silver snakes towards his hands —

or, rather, towards the stone he held in his hands. And seeing their elation and their zeal, he

heard Huzzah's laughter and felt again her tiny fingers brushing his arm as she passed the

blue egg on to him. He didn't doubt for a moment that she'd known what would come of the

gift. So, most likely, had Jude. He'd become their agent at the last, just as he'd become his

mother's, and the thought of that sweet service brought an echo of the child's laughter to his

lips.

From above, the egg was calling down a drizzle to swell the waters swirling underfoot, and

in the space of seconds the patter became a roar, and a deluge descended, violent enough to

sluice the murk of the Erasure out of the air. After a few moments, light began to break

around the Maestros, the first light this terrain had seen since Hapexamendios had drawn

the void over his Dominion. By it, Gentle saw that Jackeen's exhilaration was rapidly turning

to panic.

“We're going to drown!” he yelled, fighting to stay on his feet as the

water deepened.

Gentle didn't retreat. He knew where his duty lay. As the surf broke against their backs,

the tide threatening to drag them under, he raised Huzzah's gift to his lips and kissed it, just

as she had done. Then he mustered all his strength and threw the stone out, over the

landscape that was being uncovered before them. The egg went from his hand with a

momentum that was not his sinews' work but its own ambition, and instantly the waters

went in pursuit of it, dividing around the Maestros and taking their tides off into the

wasteland of the First.

It would take the waters weeks, perhaps even months, to cover the Dominion from end to

end, and most of that work would go unwitnessed. But in the next few hours, standing at

their vantage point where the City of God had once begun, the Maestros were granted a

glimpse of their labor. The clouds above the First, which had been as inert as the landscape

beneath, now began to churn and roil and shed their anguish in stupendous storms, which in

turn swelled the rivers that were driving their cleansing way across the rot.

Hapexamendios' remains were not despised. With the purpose of the Goddesses fueling

their every drop, the waters turned the slaughterhouse over and over and over, scouring the

matter of its poisons and sweeping it up into mounds, which the

exhilarated air festooned

with vapors.

The first ground that appeared from this tumult was close to the feet of the Maestros and

rapidly became a ragged peninsula that stretched fully a mile into the Dominion. The waters

broke against it constantly, bringing with every wave another freight of Hapexamendios'

clay to increase its flanks. Gentle was patient for a time and stayed at the border. But he

could not resist the invitation forever, and finally, ignoring Jackeen's words of caution, he

set off down the spine of land to better see the spectacle visible from the far end. The waters

were still draining from the new earth, and here and there lightning still ran on the slopes,

but the ground was solid enough, and there were seedlings everywhere, carried, he

presumed, from Yzordderrex. If so, there would be abundant life here in a little while.

By the time he'd reached the end of the peninsula the clouds overhead were beginning to

clear somewhat, lighter for their furies. Farther off, of course, the process he'd been

privileged to witness was just beginning, as the storms spread in all directions from their

point of origin. By their blazes he glimpsed the snaking rivers, going about their work with

undiminished ambition. Here on the promontory, however, there was a more benign light.

The First Dominion had a sun, it seemed, and though it wasn't yet

warm, Gentle didn't wait

for balmier weather to begin his last labors, but took his album and his pen from his jacket

and sat down on the marshy headland to work. He still had the map of the desert between

the gates of Yzordderrex and the Erasure to set down, and though these pages would

doubtless be the barest in the album, they had to be drawn all the more carefully for that

fact: he wanted their very sparseness to have a beauty of its own.

After perhaps an hour of concentrated work he heard Jackeen behind him. First a footfall,

then a question:

“Speaking in tongues, Maestro?”

Gentle hadn't even been aware of the inventory he was rattling off until his attention was

drawn to it: a seamless list of names that must have been incomprehensible to anyone other

than himself, the stopping places of his pilgrimage, as familiar to his tongue as his many

names.

“Are you sketching the new world?” Jackeen asked him, hesitating to come too close to the

artist while he worked.

“No, no,” said Gentle, “I'm finishing a map.” He paused, then corrected himself. “No, not

finishing. Starting.”

“May I look?”

“If you like.”

Jackeen went down on his haunches behind Gentle and peered over his shoulder. The

pages that depicted the desert were as complete as Gentle could make them. He was now

attempting to delineate the peninsula he was sitting on, and something of the scene in front

of him. It would be little more than a line or two, but it was a beginning.

"I wonder, would you fetch Monday for me?"

"Is there something you need?"

"Yes, I want him to take these maps back into the Fifth with him and give them to Clem."

"Who's Clem?"

"An angel."

"Ah."

"Would you bring him here?"

"Now?"

"If you would," Gentle said. "I'm almost done."

Ever dutiful, Jackeen stood up and started back towards the Second, leaving Gentle to work

on. There was very little left to do. He finished making his crude rendering of the

promontory; then he added a line of dots along it to mark his path and at the headland

placed a small cross at the spot where he was sitting. That done, he went back through the

album, to be certain that the pages were in proper order. It occurred to him as he did so that

he'd fashioned a self-portrait. Like its maker, the map was flawed but, he hoped,

redeemable: a rudimentary thing that might see finer versions in the fullness of time; be

made and remade and made again, perhaps forever.

He was about to set the album down beside the pen when he heard a hint of coherence in

the surf that was beating against the slope below. Unable to quite make sense of the sound,

he ventured to the edge. The ground was too newly made to be solid and threatened to

crumble away beneath his weight, but he peered over as far as he could, and what he saw

and what he heard were enough to make him retreat from the edge, kneel down in the dirt,

and with trembling hands start scribbling a message to accompany the maps.

It was necessarily brief. He could hear the words clearly now, rising from the surge of

waves. They distracted him with promises.

"Nisi Nirvana," they said, "Nisi Nirvana,..."

By the time he'd finished his note, laid down the album and the pen beside it, and returned

to the edge of the promontory, the sun of this Dominion was emerging from the storm clouds

overhead to shed its light on the waves below. The beams placated them for a time, soothing

their frenzy and piercing them, so that Gentle had a glimpse of the ground they were moving

over. It was not, it seemed, an earth at all, but another sky, and in it was a sphere so majestic

that to his eyes all the bodies in the heavens of the Imajica—all stars,
all moons, all noonday

suns—could not in their sum have touched its glory. Here was the
door that his Father's city

had been built to seal, the door through which his mother's name in
fable had been

whispered. It had been closed for millennia, but now it stood open,
and through it a music

of voices was rising, going on its way to every wandering spirit in
Imajica and calling them

home to rapture.

In its midst was a voice Gentle knew, and before he'd even glimpsed
its source his mind

had shaped the face that called him, and his body felt the arms that
would wrap him around

and bear him up. Then they were there—those arms, that face—rising
from the door to

claim him, and he needed to imagine them no longer. “Are you
finished?” he was asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “I'm finished.”

“Good,” said Pie 'oh' pah, smiling. “Then we can begin.”

The congregation Chicka Jackeen had left at the perimeter of the First
had steadily begun

to venture along the peninsula as their courage and curiosity grew.
Monday was of course

among them, and Jackeen was just about to call the boy and summon
him to the Reconciler's

side when Monday let out a cry of his own, pointing back along the
promontory. Jackeen

turned and fixed his eyes—as did they all—on the two figures
standing on the headland,

embracing. Later there would be much discussion between these witnesses as to what they'd

actually seen. All agreed that one of the pair was the Maestro Sartori. As to the other,

opinions differed widely. Some said they saw a woman, others a man, still others a cloud

with a piece of sun burning in it. But whatever these ambiguities, what followed was not in

doubt. Having embraced, the two figures advanced to the limit of the promontory, where

they stepped out into the air and were gone.

Two weeks later, on the penultimate day of a cheerless December, Clem was sitting in front

of the fire in the dining room of number 28, a spot from which he'd seldom risen since

Christmas, when he heard a hectic beating on the front door. He was not wearing a watch —

what did time matter now? — but he assumed it was long after midnight. Anyone calling at

such an hour was likely to be either desperate or dangerous, but in his present bleak mood

he scarcely cared what harm might await him in the street outside. There was nothing left

for him here: in this house, in this life. Gentle had gone, Judy had gone, and so, most recently,

had Tay. It was five days since he'd heard his lover whisper his name.

“Clem ... I have to go.”

“Go?” he'd replied. “Where to?”

“Somebody opened the door,” came Tay's reply. “The dead are being

called home. I have to

go.”

They wept together for a while, tears pouring from

Clem's eyes while the sound of Tay's anguish racked him from within.
But there was no

help for it. The call had come, and though Tay was grief-stricken at
the thought of parting

from Clem, his existence between conditions had become unbearable,
and beneath the

sorrow of parting was the joyful knowledge of imminent release. Their
strange union was

over. It was time for the living and the dead to part.

Clem hadn't known what loss really was until Tay left. The pain of
losing his lover's

physical body had been acute enough, but losing the spirit that had so
miraculously returned

to him was immeasurably worse. It was not possible, he thought, to be
emptier than this and

still be a living being. Several times during those dark days he'd
wondered if he should

simply kill himself and hope he would be able to follow his lover
through whatever door

now stood open. That he didn't was more a consequence of the
responsibility he felt than

from lack of courage. He was the only witness to the miracles of
Gamut Street left in this

Dominion. If he departed, who would there be to tell the tale?

But such imperatives seemed frail things at an hour like this, and as he
rose from the fire

and crossed to the front door, he allowed himself the thought that if

these midnight callers

came with death in their hands perhaps he would not refuse it.
Without asking who was on

the other side, he slid back the bolts and opened the door. To his
surprise he discovered

Monday standing in the driving sleet. Beside him stood a shivering
stranger, his thinning

curls flattened to his skull.

"This is Chicka Jackeen," Monday said as he hauled his sodden guest
over the threshold.

"Jackie, this is Clem, eighth wonder of the world. Well, am I too wet
to get a hug?"

Clem opened his arms to Monday, who embraced him with fervor.

"I thought you and Gentle had gone forever," Clem said.

"Well, one of us has," came the reply.

"I guessed as much," Clem said. "Tay went after him. And the
revenants too."

"When was this?"

"Christmas Day."

Jackeen's teeth were chattering, and Clem ushered him through to the
fire, which he had

been fueling with sticks of furniture. He threw on a couple of chair
legs and invited Jackeen

to sit by the blaze to thaw out. The man thanked him and did so.
Monday, however, was

made of sterner stuff. Availing himself of the whisky that sat beside
the hearth, he put

several mouthfuls into his system, then set about clearing the room,
explaining as he

dragged the table into the corner that they needed some working space. With the floor

cleared, he opened his jacket and pulled Gentle's gazetteer from beneath his arm, dropping

it in front of Clem.

“What's this?”

“It's a map of the Imajica,” Monday said.

“Gentle's work?”

“Yep.”

Monday went down on his haunches and flipped the album open, taking out the loose

leaves and handing the cover back up to Clem.

“He wrote a message in it,” Monday said.

While Clem read the few words Gentle had scribbled on the cover, Monday began to

arrange the sheets side by side on the floor, carefully aligning them so that the maps became

an unbroken flow. As he worked, he talked, his enthusiasm as unalloyed as ever.

“You know what he wants us to do, don't you? He wants us to draw this map on every

fuekin' wall we can find! On the pavements! On our foreheads! Anywhere and everywhere.”

“That's quite a task,” said Clem.

“I'm here to help you,” Chicka Jackeen said. “In whatever capacity I can.”

He got up from the fire and came to stand beside Clem, where he could admire the pattern

that was emerging on the floor in front of them.

“That's not the only thing you've come to do, is it?” Monday said. “Be honest.”

“Well, no,” said Jackeen. “I'd also like to find myself a wife. But that will have to wait.”

“Damn right!” said Monday. “This is our business now.”

He stood up and stepped out of the circle which the pages of Gentle's album had formed.

Here was the Imajica, or rather the tiny part of it which the Reconciler had seen : Patashoqua

and Vanaeph; Beatrix and the mountains of the Jokalaylau; Maike, the Cradle, L'Himby, and

the Kwem; the Lenten Way, the delta, and Yzordderrex. And then the crossroads outside the

city, and the desert beyond, with a single track leading to the borders of the Second

Dominion. On the other side of that border, the pages were practically empty. The wanderer

had sketched the peninsula he'd sat on, but beyond it he'd simply written: "This is a new

world.

“And this,” said Jackeen, stooping to indicate the cross at the end of the promontory, “is

where the Maestro's pilgrimage ended.”

“Is that where he's buried?” Clem said.

“Oh, no,” Jackeen said. “He's gone to places that'll make this life seem like a dream. He's left

the circle, you see.”

“No, I don't,” said Clem. “If he's left the circle, then where's he gone? Where have they all

gone?”

“Into it,” Jackeen said.

Clem began to smile.

“May I?” said Jackeen, rising and claiming from Clem's fingers the sheet which carried

Gentle's last message.

My friends, he'd written, Pie is here. I am found. Will you show these pages to the world, so

that every wanderer may find their way home?

“I think our duty is plain, gentlemen,” Jackeen said. He stooped again to lay the final page

in the middle of the circle, marking the place of spirits to which the Reconciler had gone.

“And when we've done that duty, we have here the map that will show us where we must go.

We'll follow him. There's nothing more certain. We'll all of us follow him, by and by.”